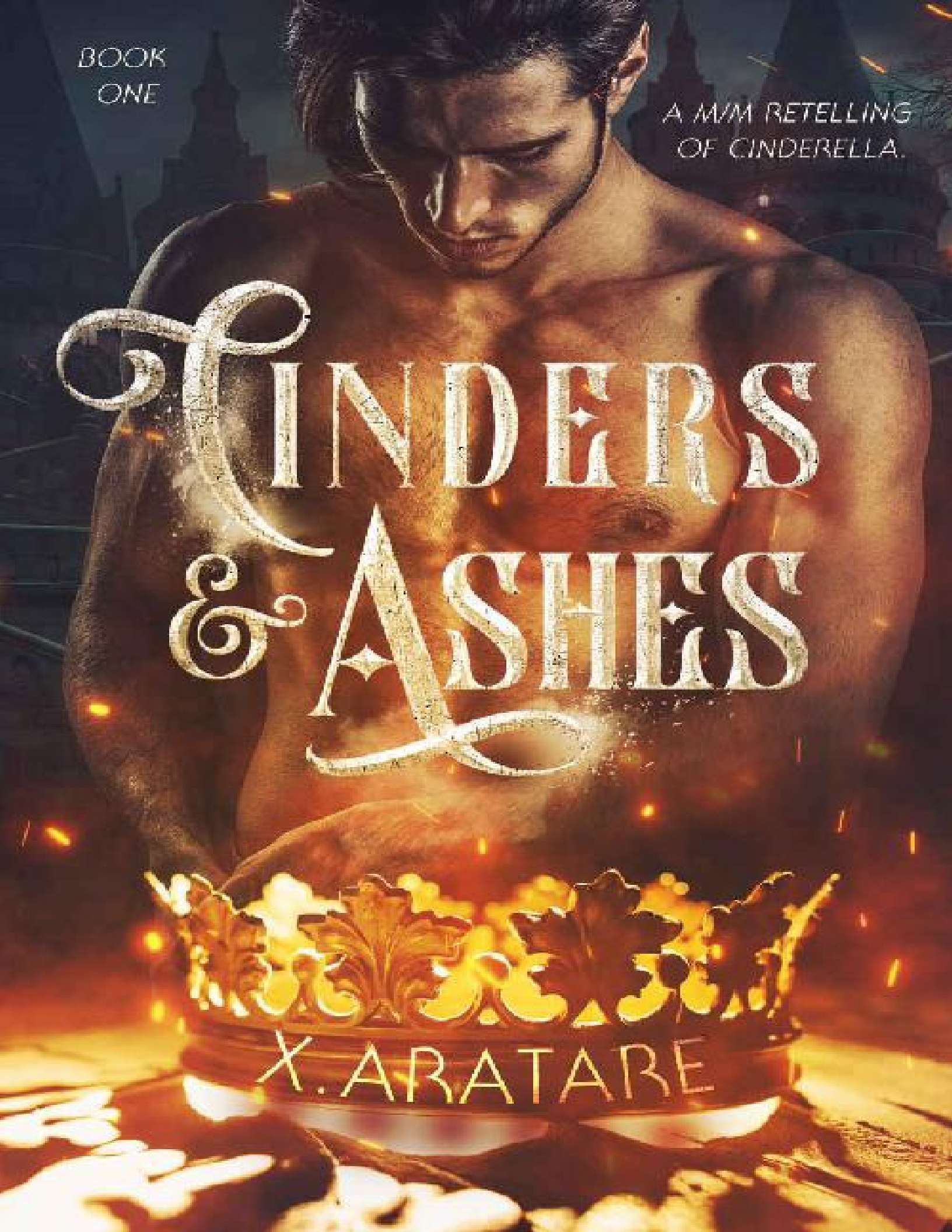
BOOK ONE
A M/M RETELLING OF CINDERELLA.
EMBERS & ASHES
X. ARATARE

CINDERS & ASHES

A GAY RETELLING OF CINDERELLA (BOOK 1)

X. ARATARE

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INTRODUCTION

A Gay Retelling of Cinderella.

A human prince and a half-blood Fae meet their match in one another. Will they be soulmates or sworn enemies?

Finn Ashton is cursed with ancient Fae blood. Once upon a time, to be a Fae was a blessing, but after Fae murdered the human king and queen, now all who show Fae magic risk exile or death. Finn lives in hiding with his cruel stepfather and stepbrothers, who offer protection in exchange for Finn acting as a servant at his own estate.

King Rohan is blessed with a crown, but must save his kingdom from ruin. With his own lands languishing since the loss of Fae magic, a match with another human royal may be his people's salvation. But Rohan has always dreamed of marrying for love, like his parents.

One day, battling monsters in the woods, Rohan stumbles upon a strange young commoner, Finn, who offers him something no royal ever can: true love. But will the secrets that Finn and Rohan keep from one another threaten the love they have, or even turn them into sworn enemies?

HALF-BLOOD

Finn Ashton dug his fingers into the raw earth of his mother's ancestral estate as he prepared to mix his Fae magic with the life in the soil. Winter had finally released its cold grasp on the land and the light touch of spring had come to Tanglewood Manor. But things were not as they should have been. The land looked and felt *dead*. Not just slumbering after a bitter winter, but barren, stripped, and empty. Finn's heart clenched.

The winter was hard--harder than ever--but it's spring now, Finn thought desperately. *Life should be returning!*

Yet the sweet scent of growing things did not tinge the wind. There was no birdsong. The tiny field mice that normally could be seen hopping through the grass looking for seed were not there. The appearance of the earth itself was wrong. This was not the rich, dark soil that Finn remembered from his childhood or even the light brown stuff from last year. It was gray and powdery instead. Desiccated.

Every year the crops have been pitiful and many have gone hungry, but this year is so much worse! What if the land produces nothing at all? Finn thought as his despair deepened. *Will we have to leave Tanglewood? Leave Dawnmore? Leave the Rirean Kingdom altogether?*

Finn's stomach, which had felt like an empty sack all winter from eating nothing but thin potato soup, suddenly felt emptier. He and the other servants had survived more on *hope* than food. Hope that when spring came around that there would be sweet berries to pick off the bushes, golden wheat to be milled into flour for bread, carrots and cabbages for soups and stews, and the rare wild game to roast over the fire. But what he was seeing before him was desolation.

How can I fix this? Finn stared down at his hands that were limned with golden light: his Fae magic made manifest. He then looked at the sterile ground. *Can anyone fix this?*

In times past, the estate had flourished. Perhaps *flourished* was too strong a word, but it had produced enough to keep them all fed, the fires lit and a roof over their heads even with his stepfather and stepbrothers' taste for luxury. This year there would be no luxuries. In fact, this year his stepfamily might also go hungry. But they would *never* accept such a fate, and anyone who did not help them escape it would pay.

Finn's gaze slid to the three men who surrounded his kneeling form. His two stepbrothers, Miles and Christopher, and his stepfather, Lord Gerard Steward, formed a triangle around him. Their clothes--all beautifully tailored and made of silk, velvet and polished leather of the highest quality--were in sharp contrast to his own threadbare tunic, skimpy pants that stopped now mid-calf instead of at the ankle as he had outgrown them years ago, and shoes that had more holes than leather on the soles.

"Are you doing anything, Finn? Or just stalling to get out of your chores?" Miles asked in a snide tone with a sniff tacked on at the end.

Finn kept his head down, but his gaze cut to Miles. His stepbrother was fox-faced, all narrow-angles and suspicious, sharp, gray eyes. He was the youngest of Finn's two stepbrothers at twenty-three and thought himself quite the catch. He wasn't.

Miles took out a dainty, linen handkerchief and blew his beak-like nose with it. He then inspected the contents before tucking it back in his velvet waistcoat. Finn's stomach clenched again at the thought that he would have to fish that out and wash it later.

"Last year, it did not take this long, Finn. I thought you would get better at this with age, or perhaps you *are* shirking your duties as Miles suggests," Christopher replied dryly as he buffed the nails of his right hand against his crimson silk tunic.

Christopher was twenty-five years old and arguably handsome with his patrician nose, strong jaw and sweep of dark blond hair. But there was something *unpleasant* about him that repelled. Perhaps his lips were too narrow or his gray eyes were too deep-set, or maybe it was the coldness of his expression. Whatever it was, most people gave Christopher a wide berth.

"Now, now, boys," his stepfather murmured in his deep, baritone voice. It was a voice that he had cultivated for years to obscure his humble beginnings. He was a big man, finely made, and looked the part of a lord with his thick dark hair with frost at the temples, neatly trimmed beard and proud bearing. But it was all fake. He had been born to a merchant and he had grown his father's business to create modest wealth. Wealth he'd spent long ago and now was squeezing Tanglewood for all it was worth. "Finn has never disappointed us before. He understands our *generosity* in not turning him over to the King's Guard. He will do his utmost to make sure the estate prospers. Won't you, Finn?"

Finn froze at the familiar threat. His stepfather's tone was friendly, not menacing, but that made it somehow worse. He was at his stepfamily's mercy. If he couldn't make the land fertile, they would reveal to King Rohan that his father was a Fae and all Fae--full-blooded or not--caught on this side of the Wall were executed. They were believed to be spies for the Eclipse Throne. The irony was that Finn didn't have any loyalty to the magical beings beyond the Wall. He hadn't even known he had any Fae blood at all until his mother's death when he was five. In his grief, his Fae magic had exploded out of him then, revealing a secret he hadn't known he'd had.

I don't even know my father's name, but King Rohan would still think I have loyalty to the people who abandoned me and my mother here, Finn thought bitterly.

"Finn?" There was a warning note in his stepfather's voice as he had, evidently, taken too long to answer.

Finn stammered out, "N-no, sir. I won't fail you. It's just…"

"Just what?" His stepfather asked as his booted feet suddenly appeared in Finn's vision.

Despite Finn using Fae magic, his stepfather had chosen to draw near. Was it to show how little he feared Finn? To establish dominance? To threaten? Probably all of the above. Other than the golden glow around his hands, Finn looked completely human. He did not have the pointed ears, the crimson eyes or the preternatural beauty of his father's people. At least, he didn't think he had the latter. Before starvation had cut him down to skin and bones, there were those who had found him handsome, if not beautiful. Even now he drew unwanted attention for his elfin looks. But he was sure that the fact he *looked* human allowed his stepfather to not associate him with the fearsome Battle Mages of the Eclipse Throne.

"Just what? Spit it out, boy!" his stepfather growled.

"It's just… the life in the land is weaker this year than before," Finn tried to explain. "So much

weaker."

His stepfather shrugged his broad shoulders. "And? Your magic will quicken it and make the estate bloom like it always has."

Finn wet his lips. Gainsaying his stepfather was never wise, but he had to this time. He had to set their expectations lower than ever before. Even though the magic within him grew each year, if there was no life in the land to quicken, it didn't matter how much magic he had. "That's just it. I'm not sure there's *enough* life in the estate this time to do that."

"It's the Fae, their Wall, that's causing this," Christopher said, his gray eyes narrowing as he gazed towards the magical border. "Everyone says that since it appeared that the land on our side has been drained of life. The Fae are taking it all. Using it for themselves."

Finn slowly turned his head towards the Wall too. It was five miles away but it couldn't be missed. The Wall transected the Lupine Woods right down the middle. It appeared to be made of dark green glass, but it was not. It almost blended in with the forest's dark trees but then it shot up past the treetops and disappeared into the sky above, seemingly without end. Those who had tried to dig beneath it had no luck either. It was infinite.

"Is it the Wall, Finn?" Miles' voice was high and tight. "Is it foul Fae magic that's destroying human land?"

Finn licked his lips. "I don't know. I've never felt the Wall draining life, but, Christopher is right, that every year since it went up, things have gotten worse here. But some say..."

He paused and licked his lips again. He should not talk about the *other* reason for why life might be being drained away.

"What do *some* say, Finn?" His stepfather asked quietly, which was a warning in and of itself.

But Finn knew that to not answer was a mistake so he had to say, "That the Fae's presence in Rirea in the past was the only thing that made this land habitable. Now that they're gone the land is naturally returning to what it was before they came."

Miles snickered. "You would *love* that to be true. That the Fae aren't thieves! That they are more in tune with the land than humans! That the Fae King Thalanil had a *good* reason for killing our good King Alexandre and Queen Cyrille! But the truth is that he murdered them out of pique and then erected the Wall, which is sucking all the life away!"

Finn gritted his teeth to stop himself from blurting out that *no one* knew what had caused the rift between Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar and the human rulers of the Rirean Kingdom, King Alexandre and Queen Cyrille De Clare, but those three. Two of them were dead and the Fae king was beyond the Wall and would not speak to any humans.

"The Wall should be destroyed!" Miles' adam's apple bobbed frantically.

"The King's Guard tried. It cannot even be *chipped*," Christopher reminded his brother dryly. "They've used battering rams, great-swords, axes, fire… every weapon we have to no avail. I have even tested my most caustic potions on it and it remains unmarred in any way."

Finn's eyes scanned the Wall. The Fae empire that lay beyond it could be seen only as shadows and bursts of light. His father was somewhere beyond the Wall. Just as inexplicable and unknowable to him as the hidden land. Finn wondered if his Fae father ever thought of him. Perhaps he did not even know of Finn's existence as his mother might not have revealed her pregnancy for fear he would come and take Finn away, as Fae had done to other half-bloods.

"So we can do *nothing*?! Our lands are bound to be drained and die?" Miles squawked.

"Everything and everyone has a weakness," his stepfather said, and his lips tightened. "We'll find a way to destroy the Wall and the Fae. In time."

Miles whipped around towards his father. “But what are we going to do now? Tanglewood’s fertility is what sets us apart from everyone else! It’s why we have an edge in the marriage market!”

Christopher’s lips pursed before he stated dryly, “Father, if Finn cannot revive the land this year then maybe some of my *potions* might. I’ve made headway in--”

“No, Christopher!” His stepfather’s expression was pinched. “Your *gift* with potions is impressive, but not--not necessary at this time.”

“What Father *isn’t* saying is that the only thing your potions have ever done is poison the neighborhood cats and dogs!” Miles snipped at his older brother.

Christopher stiffened and his eyes narrowed. “I needed subjects for my experiments. Would you rather I had used *you*?”

Miles gave his brother a wary look. “Old Jonathan died suddenly, didn’t he? After you ran out of animals to test upon.”

“He was old and a peasant.” Christopher waved a hand through the air. “They die from a brisk wind.”

“He was hale and hearty! Nothing was wrong with him at all! It was a great shock--and a terrible thing--when he died,” Finn contradicted, feeling a wave of rage well up at the name of the former coachman who had died the previous winter.

Surely, Christopher didn’t harm him, did he? Finn thought. *He kills innocent animals so easily, though. And he hardly ranks peasants above livestock in terms of worth. So he could have done it...*

The magic that limned Finn’s hands glowed brighter, going from gold to red in an instant. His stepfamily stirred uneasily. Finn drew in a deep breath to calm himself and the pure golden glow was restored. Christopher swung those cold, gray eyes towards him. His stepbrother said nothing, but Finn knew that it would cost him later in some way.

“We’ve gotten rather far afield here, boys,” his stepfather said after clearing his throat. “Now, Finn, you must make Tanglewood bloom. You must do it. As you always have.”

“It’s the only reason we keep your secret after all.” Miles’ lips flattened into a thin line for a moment. “I mean who wants a filthy half-blood under their roof? We risk King Rohan thinking *we’re* the enemy, too!”

Finn flushed hotly and the magic again that limned his hands reacted. This time it crackled menacingly. “My loyalty is to King Rohan. Just as yours is, Miles!”

Miles took a step back, blanching. “F-father! He’s threatening me with his--”

“ENOUGH! All of you!” His stepfather’s brows bristled and he regarded all three of them out of dark, angry eyes. “We are not here for this! We need Tanglewood to bloom!”

Miles and Christopher looked down at their feet. Finn drew in deep breaths to steady himself once more. He flexed his fingers. When using Fae magic he always had to keep his behavior as non-threatening and non-confrontational as possible or there would be a lashing later. But he’d forgotten that lesson. His magic was behaving badly.

“I have a--a potential solution,” Finn finally said into the tense silence.

“A solution!” His stepfather laughed tightly. “Why didn’t you say that before?”

Because I know you won’t like it, Finn thought sourly.

But out loud he stated, “It’s something I haven’t done before and… well, anyway, perhaps if I drew some life from the lands surrounding Tanglewood, there would be a better mix of life and magic. I could also *help* those estates too and--”

“No!” His stepfather nearly shouted. “I mean… *no*, Finn, as to the sharing. The taking… well, if

you need to take, you need to take. There isn't enough life in those estates for them to flourish anyway. Best to concentrate all the life in Tanglewood."

"But that would be…" Finn paused. The word he was about to say was *stealing*. But that would not go over well.

"Our land has to look the best if we're going to attract the *right* kind of bride this season," Miles said, revealing the *true* reason for not wanting to help the other estates.

"Miles," his stepfather said reproachfully. "We are good to our *friends*."

"But none of the people around here are our friends! They *still* look down upon us even though you have a title now, Father," Miles grumbled.

"But the title does not pass down to us, little brother," Christopher reminded him with a scowl. "It is only a title by marriage. Not the same thing as *blood* nobility."

Finn could see his stepfather's jaw clenching even under the full, dark beard. This was a sore spot for him, even when pointed out by his sons. Finn, by rights, was the Lord of Tanglewood Manor, but his name had been struck from all official documents. It was as if he did not exist. His stepfather had told him it was for his protection, but Finn knew it was to allow him to claim the title that he so coveted.

"If you marry very well, boys, your children will inherit wealth and titles beyond imagination. You must marry well as I did," his stepfather said lightly even though there was an angry light in his eyes. "Now, Finn, do what you must to make Tanglewood bloom, but do *not* help anyone else. If you have to siphon life from the neighboring estates, do it. But do not share the reward with them. Understood?"

"But it might help our estate too," Finn said, "if we fix what's wrong--"

"Finn!" His stepfather's voice was like a whip crack that had Finn's shoulders curving forward as if expecting an actual blow. "Do as you are told!"

The *or else* did not have to be said out loud.

IN WANT OF A HUSBAND

"You must marry, King Rohan," Uncle Hugues said in that patient, weary tone of someone who fully expects a fight. And he should, for every time he had brought up marriage with Rohan, he had gotten a firm and definite *no*.

"You already know my answer, Uncle. Why do you persevere in this thankless--and *pointless*--task?" Rohan asked with a faint smile.

"Because I hope that you will change your mind," his uncle chuckled, but he became serious all too soon. "You have seen the reports about the land, haven't you? Things are dire. Our farmers do not simply fear a poor harvest this year, but that there will be *none* at all. Things cannot go on as they have been. You know this! We must seek alliances and the best way to do that is for you to marry."

"We can handle our own problems, Uncle," Rohan stated flatly.

His hands tightened on the reins of his horse, Tempest. He and his uncle rode side by side on a meandering path in the Lupine Woods with half a dozen of the King's Guard flanking them. Rohan tried to pretend the Guard was not there. Even though their presence was for his safety, they felt more like his keepers than guardians these days.

But could he blame them? Even though 20-years had passed since his beloved parents' murders, the Guard was still haunted by their failure to protect them. They would not lose him, too, though no Fae had been seen this side of the Wall since he had assumed the throne at 18, a decade ago. There had been only human criminals to deal with. And there were more of those every year as people grew more desperate and the Guard more alert because of it.

Rohan felt the cut of his uncle's cool blue eyes upon him, assessing just how far he could push this marriage argument this time. Rohan strove not to grit his teeth. Perhaps if he let the man have his say then they could spend the rest of the day in peace.

"Go on, Uncle. Make your case for why and *who* I should marry for the good of the kingdom," Rohan said with a sigh.

His uncle smiled faintly in triumph before launching into what sounded rather like a prepared speech, "The Queen of Sultane has miles upon miles of golden wheat fields that produce more grain than her people can turn into bread or brew into beer. There are plentiful orchards as well where the boughs are heavy with ripe fruit all year round. Not to mention the game in their forests! They say that there is so much that even a child can hunt down a buck with no effort."

"A child? Truly?" Rohan asked mildly as he scanned the darkness between the massive, gnarled tree trunks for yellow eyes.

Wolf eyes.

Rohan had always hunted wolves in the Lupine Woods during the winter when prey was not so

numerous. Packs would harry the villagers that lived along the forest's border and kill their livestock in order to survive. In the past, once the snow had melted and the spring sun caused the earth to warm and vegetation to grow there had been mostly harmony between the wolves and humanity. But no longer. In the last five years, Rohan had hunted wolves even in high summer to protect his people.

It was because there was no game--certainly none a *child* could hunt down--in the Lupine Woods and the wolves were starving all the time. Now they had only two kinds of prey: livestock and humans. And their preference was humans. So his hunts had become more like continuous battles.

He reached down and patted the crossbow slung from his saddle, checking it was within easy reach. He also fingered the silver bolts that were carved with magic Fae symbols. Whether it was the silver or the symbols or both, weapons such as these were the best kind that seemed to harm the wolves. His sword, Lightbringer, also had the symbols etched up and down the blade.

His uncle sighed and lifted one elegant, graying eyebrow. "If Sultane does not interest you, what of the King of Bolan? His rivers and lakes teem with fish. It's said that they practically jump into the fishing boats! Not to mention that their extensive sea trade allows them access to exotic goods such as spices, silks and much more. Their beggars have as much gold as our merchants!"

"Sounds fascinating," Rohan murmured, completely uninterested, as he thought he heard a faint howl in the distance.

"I can see that you're transfixed," his uncle replied dryly. "So food and commerce do not interest you for the people of Rirea?"

"Those things interest me a great deal, but I will not marry either royal for them," Rohan stated.

"Oh? Why?"

"Because they would not marry *me* as I do not have rivers overflowing with fish or forests thick with game that a child could hunt!" Rohan reminded him. "What I do have are ravenous wolves galore and cold-hearted ruffians. Not much to recommend me."

"You do not mention *love* as a reason to wed you," his uncle pointed out after a moment's hesitation.

"Love?!" Rohan let out a bark of laughter.

Despite his bad reaction, Uncle Hugues pressed on, "You are quite handsome. You take after your mother in that way. And her face caused all the royals to swoon. When they learned of her quick wit they were even more eager to wed her. You, too, have that, as well."

Whenever his uncle spoke of his mother, Rohan would remember her face on the last day she lived. She had been leaning down to pick him up. The sun had gilded the right side of her face. Her hair had been like flames. But her smile had told him that he would never burn. Not with her, because she loved him so.

"While I am *honored* to be compared to my mother, I think you overstate my charms. She might have inspired love, but I… well, I do not." Rohan's lips flattened as he added, "Besides, I doubt either royal would be interested in only *love*. They have kingdoms to protect, too."

His parents had married for love, as his uncle had said. But he did not seek love for himself. Love left marks and he had enough of those after losing them. He satisfied himself with anonymous couplings that left him hot, sweaty and sated. But he was always on his way before the sun rose, and he never saw that person again. He wanted no more connections that could cost him.

In truth, what brought Rohan joy was to simply ride free into the forest with his sword slung over his back and his crossbow on his saddle. Not as a king, but as a warrior. He did not wear his kingly, heavy chainmail today, but the light yet strong leatherwork that Rufus had made for him. It allowed him to move quickly and easily while giving him all the protection he needed. And, while finely

made, it bore no crest nor any sign of his rank. It allowed him to feel one with the forest and did not draw unwelcome attention.

"You'd be surprised how many *do* want love. You *could* try and seduce one or both of them," his uncle suggested.

"I would be putting myself in a false position as a lover, Uncle. I have no time for such frippery," Rohan answered flatly.

"Love is a funny thing. It has no time for our plans either. It simply… happens," his uncle told him.

He glanced over at his uncle then. The older man's face showed no emotions, but he wondered if his uncle was feeling them keenly talking of love. Hugues had lived an ascetic lifestyle, never marrying himself, though he still turned heads at court with his strong jaw and the thick blond hair that was silvering at his temples. It had been rumored he'd had a great love in the past but that something tragic had occurred. Hugues never spoke of it and Rohan felt he shouldn't ask.

"Love, or the appearance of it, can always be manufactured if there is a good enough reason," his uncle proposed.

"I could not do that," Rohan answered with a shake of his head. "Besides, I do not want our kingdom to be dependent on another country. I want Rirea to shine again, not be absorbed into another kingdom."

As soon as he said that, both their eyes lifted to the Wall. It was a solid mass of dark green. He had often gone and stood in front of it, staring into the glass-like material to try and glimpse the murdering Fae on the other side. He'd even tried to smash through the Wall, hacking at it until his blades broke. But the Wall remained unscathed.

"The kingdom will not--*cannot*--shine again so long as the Wall is there and the Fae siphon the life of the land," his uncle said finally.

"I know," Rohan answered flatly again. He gritted his teeth.

"So forget love and food, does *war* against the Fae interest you, nephew?" his uncle asked.

"War?" Rohan turned his head towards the older man. "We cannot fight what we cannot get to. The Wall--"

"I may have a way to get through it," his uncle cast his voice low.

"WHAT?!" Rohan could not help the shock in his tone. He almost drew back on Tempest's reins, but his uncle indicated that they should keep riding. Casting his voice low, he leaned towards his uncle as he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Like all things born of Fae magic, the Wall is linked to nature," his uncle explained softly, his eyes darting this way and that as if someone could overhear them. No one came into the Lupine Woods willingly any longer. "I believe the Wall grew from a singular tree."

Rohan frowned. "I would believe that if the wall were made of branches, but it's *glass* or something like it."

"There was once a tree who had leaves of glass, which would create music when the wind blew through its branches. A tinkling noise," his uncle explained. "I remember hearing it… once."

Rohan frowned. He did not recall such a wonder. But he'd been only eight when his parents had died. The forest and surrounding land had been very different then. He had vague memories of the woods teeming with wildlife. Gorgeous flowers had erupted everywhere. The trees had been tall and strong with amazing canopies. But a tree with leaves of glass? That was new.

Depression pressed down upon him. There were no such trees any longer. Instead, he saw yet more evidence of decay all around them. Gnarled trunks and twisted branches. Leaves that seeped

poison and animals who seemed more like monsters than wildlife.

"If we could find this tree and chop it down," his uncle explained, "the whole of the Wall would collapse."

Rohan's mind reeled at this. Could it be so easy? Chop down a single tree and have the vile Wall be destroyed at the same time? Without the Wall he was certain that the land would be restored to its former glory. At least in time.

"Do you have any idea where this tree is? The Lupine Woods are not exactly small," Rohan pointed out.

"I have some clues. Nothing definite yet, but I am on its track."

"But even if we were to somehow find such a tree, I doubt that it would be unprotected," Rohan mused. "Simply going near it would, undoubtedly, trigger defenses. Magical ones that we likely cannot counter."

"Magic always has a counter. We and the Fae were not always friends before the Wall came up. There was a time when we fought them and *won*." His uncle's chin tipped up in pride.

Rohan's brows drew together. He had heard these glorious tales of war between humans and Fae where the humans were the victors. According to Rufus--who was older than dirt and claimed to have heard of these times from people who had lived them--the battles devastated both sides so there was a stalemate between them. No one could triumph. So there had been a truce and, as part of that truce, humanity had given up its powers against the Fae and the Fae had ensured Rirea prospered.

But those are fairy tales! Not real. I cannot imagine humanity ever giving up such power over the Fae, Rohan scoffed internally. *And the Fae never give anything to anyone! Not without the price being so steep that one might as well never have gotten it.*

"I can see that you have little faith in what I say, nephew." His uncle smiled thinly.

"No, it is just that there are so many *maybes*. Nothing solid to solve our problems." His gaze slid to his uncle. "And *do not* say marriage again."

His uncle laughed. "I won't! Not for the rest of the day in any case. Well, maybe *one* more time."

"Uncle!"

"I have not yet gotten to the *second* part of my plan. Say we could bring down the Wall, that is only the first step to reclaim what the Fae took," his uncle's voice warmed with the topic, growing deeper and more robust than the usual scholarly dryness he presented to the world. "We would have to deal with the Fae themselves after that. Rirea does not have the army to do this. Not on its own."

"Neither do the Queen of Sultane or the King of Bolan!" Rohan shook his head.

In his mind's eye, he imagined the Wall gone and his own forces facing off against line after line of Fae Battle Mages all in their black and silver armor, spelled to repel bolts and swords. Not only was their armor enchanted to protect them, their weapons--mighty axes, greatswords, dual-wielding daggers and bows--were enchanted with fire, ice, acid and more. They would cut through his people like a hot knife through butter. It would be a massacre. His hands tightened on his reins again. Tempest tossed his head, feeling his agitation. To destroy the Wall, to conquer the Fae, and to free Rirea… these were the things he dreamed of.

"No, those kingdoms would not be the best choice to seek aid from, but…" His uncle let the sentence hang for a moment, knowing that Rohan would fill in the blank himself.

And Rohan did.

"But the Achuviel Kingdom would?" Rohan spoke the name of the war-like kingdom with a mixture of anger and dread.

Achuviens lived for battle. Every single person in the kingdom was trained from birth to fight.

Their whole society was a martial one. Bloodthirstiness was bred into them. They would die to the last man, woman and child. His parents had called them *wild*. They were all mad in Rohan's opinion.

"They are our enemy, Uncle. As much as the Fae are! *More* some would say since the Fae hide behind the Wall and the Achuviel army stands at our doorstep!" Rohan's voice rose up and echoed around them.

Hugues lifted a hand to quiet him down. "The enemy of our enemy is our *friend*."

Rohan let out a disbelieving laugh. "Why would King Tearlach *marry* to obtain Rirea when he could simply take it by force? Tearlach has not attacked, because there is nothing here to take. And we are the barrier between him and the Wall. He uses us like cannon-fodder should the Fae attack humanity again."

"Tearlach would not marry if the prize was simply *Rirea*," his uncle agreed. "But we both know that he would do most anything to marry *you*. The only question is if you would pay that price to restore the kingdom."

BLOOM

Finn couldn't delay any longer. He had to try and make Tanglewood bloom or his life would be forfeit. So he let out a shaky breath and indicated he was ready to start. He knew it would be a lost cause to explain to his stepfather that if he extended his healing magic to the nearby estates that their estate might benefit as more life would come back all around. But Lord Gerard Steward was a miserly man and would never allow it. Yet Finn would not steal from the neighboring estates either. So it meant he would have to use more of his magic and hope it would be enough.

Finn closed his eyes. He could feel the coolness of the freshly turned earth against his knees. His ragged pants were thin and worn and the dampness seeped through them to his skin. Luckily, the spring sun was warm, though the wind from the Lupine Woods was chill.

He reached out and carefully drew the life in the land to him like one would a skittish colt. He pooled all the life in front of him and slowly fed his magic into it. He coaxed that life against his breast, let it fill him until he felt like he could bloom just as the land would over the coming weeks and months. His eyes remained closed, but he could still see a trace of the golden light that suffused him through his eyelids. It was the same color one saw when looking at the sun with closed eyes.

As he worked, the pool grew larger and larger. It spread out from him in waves. He faintly heard his stepbrothers gasp as the pool reached them. Magna, the cook for Tanglewood Manor, had told him that when his magic touched her that all the hair on her body stood on end and for days afterwards she shocked everyone she touched. But it was worth it, as she claimed it also made the pains from her rheumatism cease and added a spring to her step. She also teased him that more babies were conceived right after he *blessed* the land, as she termed it. His cheeks would always bloom with blushes when she said that. But, he had to admit, she wasn't lying. He had seen evidence of it himself with people and animals on the estate.

His body jerked as there was a hard *stop* to his ability to draw more life to him. There was not enough just as he had feared! He cracked his eyelids open. Golden light swirled around him in the shapes of glyphs and runes. His gaze lifted to the Wall once more.

Are you the cause of this? Finn thought.

Finn was not sure if he was asking the Wall or the Fae beyond it.

Do you not know the suffering here? Finn mentally demanded.

There was no answer, of course.

You've abandoned the land. You've abandoned… me, Finn cried internally. *If you won't help me… what am I saying? You've never helped me! Not once!*

Anger whirled inside of him again and the golden light grew red. But he felt *something* from the

Wall. Or no. Not from the Wall. From *beyond* it.

Life! So much life! Finn gasped. *I just need a little! Just a little more to make Tanglewood bloom.*

He thought of what his stepfather had told him: to take, if he needed to take. But he also knew it would be stealing. And the Fae did not react well to those who stole from them. But would they know? And, if they did, would they look beyond their Wall? After all, no human had magic and there was, allegedly, only humans now on this side of the Wall. But if they did look and did find him, he *was* a Fae, just like them. Well, a half-blood, to be sure! But would it be stealing, if he took just a little from the Fae side? Did the Fae not owe him that? Did his father not owe him?

And it's not just for me, Finn thought. *Not just for my stepfamily either. But for Magna and all the other people on the estate that depend upon Tanglewood blooming!*

He opened himself to the life he felt on the other side of the Wall. He did not coax it. He did not draw it. He simply let it know that he was there. And to his shock and delight, it *surged* towards him with an eagerness that was almost frightening! It would have become a torrent if he had not quickly slammed the connection shut. His breathing was stentorious.

"My God! Can you feel it, boys? The land… it smells of spring! Of life!" his stepfather cried out in awe. "You're doing it, Finn! Keep it up!"

Finn couldn't believe how much life was at his command. There had never been so much. He truly could make Tanglewood *flourish* this season and the next and maybe even the next. It was astounding. He stared at the Wall though. No one would know what he'd done. No one would know, would they?

What's done is done, Finn told himself. *I need to do the best I can for everyone now.*

The pool of life and magic had become the size of a large pond now. Deep and broad. He could sense the livestock in the barn as the magic lapped at the horse's stalls. A beautiful gray mare, Sweetfire, nickered and moved restlessly, wanting to run over the newly restored earth. The pigs oinked eagerly as they stepped towards the bright golden light that then washed over them in waves, leaving them happy and rested. The chicken and geese flapped their wings and feathers flew everywhere as they, too, soaked in the mixture of life and magic.

The golden glow swept beyond the stables and ran over the fields of grain, corn, potatoes, carrots, cabbages, tomatoes and grapes. Tanglewood had once been known for its wine in his grandfather's time and his stepfather was interested in revitalizing the business. Finn felt the life stirring in those old vines as he became a part of the very earth of the estate. There was enough this year to try to re-establish them.

Finally, the golden glow reached the Lupine Woods where the estate ended. Finn should have pulled back mentally and magically then. His job was done. The forest thrived, but not in the way of most forests. Instead of firm trunks and wide, spreading branches with many leaves supporting a variety of animal life, the Lupine Wood's trees did indeed grow large, but their trunks were gnarled and their branches twisted. Their leaves, though thick and full, were poisonous to the touch.

The streams that had once run crystal clear between the trees now flowed black. Animals that drank from the waters changed, becoming aggressive and any who dared eat their meat became violently ill and often died. And, as its name suggested, the forest was filled with ravenous wolves. On the wind, Finn suddenly heard chilling howls. His eyelids snapped open as he released the rest of the magic and life. A final golden wave flowed out from him then settled into the earth and disappeared. Finn sagged forward. He was exhausted. But he had succeeded beyond his wildest hopes.

"Well, well!" His stepfather sounded hearty and slapped his right shoulder. "And you said there

wasn't enough life to make Tanglewood bloom! But I swear, I think this will be our best year yet!"

"Yes," Finn said weakly.

He would not tell anyone about reaching beyond the Wall. His stepfather was clearly feeling the healthful, energizing effects of his magic and was grinning as he surveyed the estate. Then he looked down at Finn, who was drooping forward. It was taking too much energy to lift his head up.

"You get to have the rest of the day off, Finn," his stepfather said. "That's tradition. And don't say I don't treat you correctly."

"No, sir," Finn murmured, even as his heart quickened at the thought of this half-day for himself.

Even though he was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to simply sleep for as long as possible, he couldn't waste this yearly moment of freedom. Perhaps he would take Sweetfire out for a ride, and make sure those wolves he heard weren't hurting anyone.

"But, Father, I need Finn to shine my shoes!" Miles squawked. "I'm to see Lady Gilbray today and I won't be properly outfitted if you let him go faff off!"

"And he is supposed to gather certain herbs for me for my experiments, Father. Today is a perfect day for that. If he waits until tomorrow then I will be delayed in my work!" Christopher scowled.

"It is just half a day, boys," his stepfather said weakly. "Perhaps the other servants could help you--"

"Father, these are *Finn's* responsibilities! What precedent would we be setting if we made others do his chores?" Miles asked, sniffing. "It wouldn't help Finn, that's for certain. The other servants would resent it!"

Finn's jaw clenched. Could they not allow him one half-day off? But he wouldn't leave the other servants with his chores. Not that they would resent it. On the contrary, they would be happy to see him with some time off. But he would not burden them because their chores were already heavy enough.

He was not surprised when his stepfather capitulated, "Well, you have a point, Miles. Finn, you can take time for yourself *after* you do the rest of your chores. That's fair, isn't it?"

It was not fair. None of this was fair. But it did not matter. Because he was a half-blood Fae, so he had no choice.

Rohan tossed his head, much like Tempest did when he attempted to lead the horse into a dark patch of the Lupine Woods, at the mention of Tearlach and marriage. He knew his uncle was right about Tearlach's *interest* in him.

Soon after he had been crowned, Tearlach had come to pay his respects. The man was twenty years his senior with pale hair and paler eyes. He wore black from head to toe with white fur around the collar. What little flesh he showed was cadaverous in color and clammy to the touch. There was something… *dead* about him. There were rumors he was a necromancer. That was likely nonsense. No human had magic, let alone the ability to raise the dead. But Tearlach's appearance could easily lead one to believe he bandied with skeletons and corpses.

"Think of the advantages to you, Rohan," King Tearlach had purred with a wave of one hand. "Rirea is dying all around you. The Fae have poisoned it. Leave it to die and come to my home. *Your* home."

Something must have shown on Rohan's face when Tearlach made the offer. Horror at the thought of letting the cadaverous, Achuviel king touch him or furious rage at the thought of leaving his people to perish. Probably both and more. Tearlach gestured towards his own face that bore three deep scars that puckered the skin. The scars ran from his right eyebrow down to his chin.

"You fear you could not come to love this face?" Tearlach asked and there was a mixture of malevolent amusement and barely suppressed rage. The pale eyes burned at him to admit he found Tearlach ugly and foul.

But Rohan would not give him what he wanted.

"I wish to be a king in my own right. Rirea is *my* kingdom. I will bring it back to life," Rohan answered. Tearlach's scars were not what repulsed him. The man's whole aspect did.

Tearlach actually laughed, pleased again at his *spirit*, Rohan supposed.

"You will try, but you will fail. This is beyond you. Don't take that personally. The Fae are too powerful. Thalanil drains Rirea for sport. Not because he needs the power," Tearlach scoffed.

"I will *succeed*." Rohan's eyes narrowed. "I will undo the damage to this land and see it prosper!"

Tearlach grinned, showing abnormally sharp teeth. "Oh, I think I'll enjoy watching you try! And when you realize the truth of what I've said, I also look forward to hearing you beg for help."

Rohan shook his head as if to shake away the memory. But before he had any sort of chance there was the sound of *chimes*. The sound was beautiful. It echoed all around them. He pulled up on Tempest's reins. His uncle did the same as their eyes searched for the source of the sound.

"The tree!" his uncle gasped.

"It's not a tree! It's the *Wall* itself!" Rohan cried.

But the beautiful sound of chimes died as if it had never been and it was replaced by the howls of wolves. Not just one or two or even the size of a pack, but *dozens*. The Lupine Woods was suddenly alive with yellow eyes all gazing at them with an almost maddened rage. Rohan grabbed for his crossbow. It could fire three bolts in quick succession. He slotted in three of the silver bolts and aimed at the nearest set of eyes.

"My king, we need to retreat!" His Captain of the Guard, Leonid Blanchet, cried.

"No, hold the line!" Rohan commanded. "These creatures are maddened. If they make it past us they will go down into the village. It will be a slaughter!"

"Then get into the center of our ranks, your majesty!" Leonid begged.

"You already know his answer!" Uncle Hugues gave out a rough laugh. "It will be the same as it was to my suggestion to marry!"

"Draw your crossbows!" Rohan commanded.

He heard their horses shuffling nervously as the howls echoed all around them. The Guard grabbed their crossbows and everyone stilled as they waited for the attack.

Rohan's eyes slid between the dark places between the gnarled trunks. He caught movement to the right. He brought his crossbow around, but the shaggy body disappeared behind a thick tree trunk. There was movement to his left. He turned and took aim. But the wolf was out of sight. He almost loosed a bolt due to adrenaline.

"They're flanking us," Leonid hissed and his horse danced beneath him, reading his anxiety.

"Wolves *flank*?" Another of the soldiers gasped.

"These wolves do," Rohan muttered. "Keep your wits about you, soldiers! Don't waste any bolts! Wait for them to come to us!"

There were "ayes" and "yeses" to him, but he caught sight of many pale, sweaty faces and flared nostrils. Fear was already running in the Guard's ranks. If one of them lost it, all of them would, and there would be a stampede.

"The chimes… whatever that was. It's affected the wolves," his uncle murmured. "Could we be near the tree now? Perhaps these are some of the tree's defenses?"

"That sound came from all along the Wall, Uncle," Rohan muttered. "I don't think it was emanating from any set place."

His uncle had out his crossbow as well and his gaze flickered from one set of yellow eyes to the next. Rohan drew in a deep breath. He swore that he could smell the wolves' charnel-scented breath. The thunder of his own heartbeat crowded out the voices of the soldiers and his uncle. His breathing was a thin hiss in his ears. Time seemed to slow as he met the yellow gaze of a wolf dead ahead of him in the woods. He knew what was about to happen.

"They're going to attack… NOW!" Rohan roared.

And dozens of wolves seemed to materialize out of the forest itself. The nearest one was a shaggy gray wolf with saliva dripping from its massive jaws. Rohan smoothly lifted the crossbow, drew in another breath to steady himself, and fired. The bolt went through the wolf's right eye and slid home into its brain. The wolf went down and blood poured from the wound. The wolf had not made a sound in death, but it's pack mates did. They let out thunderous howls of grief and rage. They would make the humans pay for that death.

The second wolf leaped on him from the left-hand side. Tempest reared up and gave out a whinny of fear and anger. That gave Rohan the time to turn and shove the crossbow practically under this brown wolf's chin and pull the trigger. Blood sprayed everywhere as the arrow exited through the top

of the wolf's snout.

He wheeled Tempest around as the wolves came fast and thick from every direction. His third bolt missed a silvery gray wolf by inches, but his uncle's bolt hit the beast in the flank. It let out a howl and bounded away, leaving a trail of ruby red drops on the gray forest floor. He nodded his head in thanks, but his uncle was already spinning towards the next attacker.

There were shouts from his soldiers. He saw one of the younger soldiers--a man named Piet--get hit full-on in the chest by a wolf. Piet tumbled off of his horse and the wolves were upon him. He could not see Piet through the moving, furry bodies. There were shrill screams, then a gurgle and then nothing.

Rohan let out a roar of rage. He grabbed for his sword, Lightbringer. The blade rang as it left its sheath and there was a burst of light that drove the wolves back. He rode into the thickest part of the fray. He swung Lightbringer with ferocity. Wolf heads parted from wolf bodies. There were squeals as blood spurted from wolf necks. He sliced through wolf spines. Crimson sprayed everywhere. The scent of copper filled the air. He felt hot rivulets of blood stream down his cheeks. Tempest kicked wolves that got too close to their rear. There were high-pitched whines from the furry bodies that still circled them but now stayed out of reach of his blade and Tempest's hooves. But Rohan drove on into the thick of the pack.

"Rohan! Come back!" his uncle shouted.

His uncle's voice sounded awfully far away. Rohan glanced over his shoulder only to realize that he had ridden thirty-feet from Uncle Hugues and the Guard. Between him and them were countless wolves. Snarling and snapping, the wolves were herding him and Tempest further away from the others. Rohan skinned back his upper lip from his teeth. He would have to race back through them. A huge gray wolf lunged for him. He swung Lightbringer in a glittering arc and the wolf was disemboweled. Its guts rained down on the other wolves who howled, snarled and snapped.

"We'll come to you, my king!" Leonid said as he prepared to have the Guard charge through the wolves.

Rohan shook his head fiercely. "No! Stay there! It's our exit! I will--" His voice dropped off as his eyes widened. "What--what is *that*?"

Out of the woods, a wolf strode out on silent paws. It was huge. Twice the size of any of the other wolves. Its fur was snow white. And it's eyes were… *red*. Glowing red like the embers of a fire.

Fae eyes.

The white wolf stood on a rise between him and his people. The other wolves and humans froze where they were, all eyes upon it. As big as a horse, he realized that this wasn't a normal wolf. It wasn't like any wolf that normally roamed the Lupine Woods. But it wasn't a twisted creature that the woods created. It was *pure* somehow. And that's when it came to him.

This wolf is from the Fae side of the Wall. Were the chimes we heard it coming through? Can the Fae enter Rirea at any time just like this wolf?

The white wolf's red eyes regarded him with a steadiness that wasn't animalistic. There was intelligence there. And a coldness that corkscrewed through Rohan. It seemed to be peering into his soul and finding him wanting.

It's magnificent. Terrible, too, but truly beautiful, he had to admit. *But it will kill me all the same no matter how lovely it is.*

The white wolf had the upper ground. If Rohan were to try and race past it, the white wolf would simply leap down upon him. He'd be slammed onto the ground and its jaws would be ripping out his throat in seconds. He could almost imagine his own gurgling screams, like Piet's, echoing in the

wood.

I can't stay here. The wolves are cowed by this one--or maybe controlled by it--but it's going to grow weary of this standoff and then all hell will break loose!

There was only one chance for him to live. He had to kill the white wolf. He was too far away to use Lightbringer. His right hand stole slowly down to his saddle where the bolts for his crossbow were kept. The white wolf's red eyes followed the movement. The moment his fingers brushed the bolts, the white wolf revealed its sharp teeth. Another of the smaller wolves snapped at him. He bashed it with the flat of his sword and the wolf let out a pained squeal before leaping away. His head shot back towards the white wolf. It had come nearer. It tilted its head at him, studying him, ready to take him apart.

"SHOOT! SHOOT IT!" his uncle's voice rose up shrill and hoarse, breaking the tense silence.

"No! Lord De Clare, we could hit the king!" Leonid shouted and the crossbows that were aimed at the white wolf lowered.

His uncle's face was pasty with fear and yet his lips were writhing back from his teeth with hatred. The white wolf's head snapped towards his uncle and then… then Rohan could have sworn that there was recognition in its red eyes. Or, at least, that was what he thought he saw there as the white wolf opened its massive maw to show razor-sharp teeth to snarl at his uncle. The white wolf took one step on its gigantic paws towards Hugues as if preparing to spring.

"NO!" Rohan screamed.

He would not lose another family member!

He would not!

He dug his heels into Tempest's sides urging the horse towards the white wolf. The other wolves had retreated slightly and offered them a mostly clear path between him and the white wolf. Tempest obeyed his command though with a high-pitched whinny of terror. He brought his sword up as he began to charge. The white wolf jerked its massive head around towards Tempest and growled. Those red eyes seemed to glow with *fire*.

Numbness went through Rohan's body. All his strength seemed to drain out of him as he stared into the white wolf's eyes. Tempest then reared back and Rohan lost his seat. He was flung off of Tempest and hit the ground so hard that the breath was knocked out of him and his ears rang. His right foot though was still in the stirrup and he couldn't get it out.

"No!" Leonid screamed. "King Rohan!"

Wolf howls rang all around Rohan. He saw the wolves coming towards him from all sides. Mouths open. Jaws slavering. Yellow eyes filled with malevolent hunger. Rohan tried to lift Lightbringer to defend himself, but the lack of strength had him unable to lift it an inch. The wolves lunged and Rohan let out a yell of defiance.

But then he was moving! Moving fast! He was being dragged along the forest floor. He managed to look at the direction he was going in. Tempest was bolting! He heard the howls of frustrated wolves coming after them.

Then the side of his head struck one of those gnarled trees and everything went black.

KINDNESS

"Finn!" Magna called to him just as he exited the manor house.

She sounded extra sprightly today for her 68-years of life. Finn turned his head and smiled warmly at her. He could already tell that the blooming of the land with his magic had affected her positively.

"Magna, what is it? Can I help you with anything?" Finn asked.

He shifted the cloth bag he had slung over one shoulder where he would store Christopher's herbs once he gathered them in the forest. It would be his last task of the day before he would have a little time for himself.

He had just finished making sure that Miles' shoes shone, not to mention doing half a dozen other "small" tasks that his stepbrother required of him, before Miles reluctantly admitted that Finn was "done for now". Miles had sniffed repeatedly while Finn had done his chores and acted as if Finn getting even a few hours to himself was a burden and too much to ask for. Finn had bitten his tongue and had not responded. If he had talked back, Miles would have, undoubtedly, thought up dozens of more tasks for him to do in retaliation.

But he pushed all thoughts of Miles and Christopher from his mind as the elderly woman with the steel gray hair hustled towards him with a wicker basket over her right arm. Her face was wreathed in smiles. She caught his hands in hers. She smelled of baking bread and all the warm, wholesome scents of the kitchen.

"Oh, Finn, you made the estate bloom!" she enthused. The lines on her face seemed lessened. There was a glint of excitement in her eyes, which were clear and not rheumy. "I think this will be the best year yet! And I had such little hope before! Everything was so… *dead*."

Magna and certain other longtime servants who had worked for his mother knew of his magic. They had all been there when it had exploded out of him from grief at her passing. Magna had been the one to hold and rock him after the magical explosion had passed. She'd never been afraid of him and thought his magic was a gift. But she had been alive before the Wall and had even claimed to know some Fae when she was younger.

She'd told him often enough that the Fae weren't at all like they were portrayed. Yes, they were reserved and that made them appear aloof and cold, but it was almost shyness. But when one truly befriended them, the Fae were the best friends one could have. She had no idea, though, who his father was. His mother had hidden that from everyone.

"It was surprising to me too," he told her, not expanding on the fact that he had stolen--*not stolen! Just took what was mine, and just a little, too!*--of the life from beyond the Wall.

As he'd done the chores for Miles, he had half-convinced himself that maybe he *hadn't* really

taken life from the other side of the Wall. Maybe it had just seemed like he'd done so, but maybe he'd just taken from the Lupine Woods. But, in his heart, he knew the truth. He had taken from the Fae. Yet Finn felt a mixture of excitement and dread about going to the Wall today to gather herbs for Christopher. He knew exactly where he'd drawn--*allegedly drawn!*-- the life.

Would there be any sign of what he had done?

There won't be any sign, because I didn't do it! He lied to himself.

Would there be any Fae at the Wall, inspecting it?

They don't care about the humans! He sincerely hoped.

Would he be able to see them as though through a glass darkly?

They'd never know it was me, Finn protested internally. *I'm no one. I'm nothing. Just a servant. And though being a servant is a noble thing, no one would look at me and know what I can do.*

"Well, I haven't felt so good in…" Here she paused and cocked her head to the side as she tried to remember a time when she'd felt this healthy. She finally shook her head and let out a laugh. "I can't say I ever remember a time like this to be honest!"

Finn smiled broadly and felt his guilt and fear ease a little. He *should* be proud of this. It had been such a hard winter and Magna suffered badly from rheumatism. Every joint of hers had ached, causing her to moan in pain even in her sleep. Emmott, the head gardener who had been sweet on Magna for decades, had often rubbed salve into her shoulders and aching feet to try and ease her pain. But towards the end of the winter, her fingers had started to curl like claws and it had taken quite a few hours for them to unbend for her to do her work in the kitchen. He glanced down at her hands now and found the fingers straight and supple. He had been right to take the life.

"I'm glad, Magna," Finn said and he meant it.

Can it be called stealing when the Fae have so much and we have so little? Finn wondered. *Look at Magna! She appears 10 years younger than she did just this morning. No, surely such an act cannot be called stealing!*

"Oh, but I mustn't keep you! I know you have your day off! Tradition!" she twittered.

He opened his mouth to tell her that wasn't quite the case this year, but he stopped himself. She would get angry and righteous on his behalf. He didn't want her to speak up to his stepbrothers or, gods forbid, his stepfather! She'd be punished. So he just smiled tightly and said nothing.

"But I'm so glad I caught you before you went off. I put something together for you from the kitchen," she said and tapped the wicker basket he'd noticed earlier.

She opened the lid and his stomach immediately growled. The scent of bread still warm from the oven wafted up to him. There was also a small pat of butter and a jar of honey. He even saw some dried meat tucked beside the honey pot! He hadn't had such a feast in… well, just like with Magna, he couldn't remember the last time!

"Magna, where did you get this?" Finn looked around with alarm, sure that his stepbrothers or stepfather would come storming out of the manor, demanding that such fine food be returned at once!

"These are just leftovers from one of your father's tea parties. The meat is something I have a store of for emergencies or special occasions!" Magna waved her free hand through the air. "No one will notice any of it being gone. Don't you worry, Finn!"

But Finn's heart still beat with alarm. His magic might have made her reckless, feeling too good to remember the bad. "But--"

"No, dear, you *take* it. You earned it, Finn." She put the basket in his hands. "You've saved this estate year after year with only a day off as payment. And that is so little, it can hardly be called payment at all!" Her brown eyes darkened with the indignation of it. "If your mother could see how

they've treated you…"

She did not finish the sentence just shook her head and clucked a little. Finn remembered how his mother--on her deathbed no less--had made his stepfather promise to take care of him as if Finn was Gerard's own flesh-and-blood son.

Her face had been pale as drawn milk and slick with sweat. Her fingers, so thin from her wasting illness, had almost looked like claws as she had clutched the front of his stepfather's tunic.

"Finn's special, Gerard," she had breathed out, her voice raspy and weak, but filled with determination to speak. "You have no idea… no idea how special. He could--could change the course of things perhaps if… if… oh, if..."

Her words had turned into groans of agony. She'd arched back in the bed, her body like a bow. When the fit passed, her eyes were unfocused and she appeared too exhausted to speak. Later, Finn had thought what she'd said about him to be feverish rantings and nothing more. He wasn't special at all. He couldn't even chart the course of his own life, so he certainly couldn't change things for anyone else!

"Don't strain yourself, Maeve. Please!" his stepfather had begged her.

Gerard had sat by her bedside for days as death stripped everything from her, holding her hands, mopping her feverish brow, speaking to her endlessly when she needed something to distract her from the pain. He'd wept while she was dying. His eyes had never been dry. This was one of the very few reasons that Finn couldn't quite hate him, even now.

"Promise me you will take care of him like your very own," his mother pleaded. "Please take care of my Finn."

These had been the last words she'd spoken. Her eyes had fallen shut. Her breathing was so faint that her chest was hardly moving.

"I will, Maeve, I promise," his stepfather answered her. Finn had wondered if she'd heard his answer. His stepfather continued on, "I'll treat him as my own beloved son. A third boy. My youngest."

His stepbrothers shifted uneasily as Gerard said that, but Finn hadn't truly understood why. And, the truth was, he wouldn't have cared less if he had known their feelings at the time, which were that they didn't *want* to call him brother. His focus had been elsewhere. He had still been waiting for a miracle to happen. His mother--his intelligent, goodhearted, wonderful mother--could not die! People who were needed so desperately could not die! But she *had* died and he had revealed his Fae nature and his stepfather had not honored his promise to her.

Finn had often wondered if only he could have simply controlled his magic, if his stepfather would have loved him like a son, treating him as the beloved youngest child he'd promised he would. If only he hadn't used his magic then...

But, then again, without my ability to make the land bloom, Tanglewood would have long ago ceased to produce enough to keep us. And it would have killed me to leave Tanglewood. It's the last part of my mother I have left.

"Finn?" Magna's head was tilted to the side.

She'd clearly asked him a question and he hadn't heard her, because he had been lost in his memories.

"I'm sorry, Magna. I don't know where my head is at," he confessed with a small smile. "Thank you so much for the food. But you shouldn't have. I don't want you to get in trouble on my behalf."

She touched his cheek and her eyes blurred for a moment with tears. "Oh, Finn, it is no trouble. You are the Lord of Tanglewood Manor in my opinion. I work for *you*."

He returned a watery smile of his own. “T-thank you, Magna.”

“So where are you off to for your day?” she asked, composing herself. “Going into town? Perhaps go look at Reave Castle? You could even go swimming in the Iron Sea, though the water is too cold in my opinion!”

“I’m going to ride Sweetfire and also have a picnic.” He hefted up the basket.

“That sounds lovely. You have fun!” She patted his cheek one last time.

He gave her another smile and wave as he went towards the stables where Sweetfire was already nickering loud enough for him to hear.

“Oh, Finn!” Magna called. He turned back to her. “Be careful if you go near the woods today. Emmott heard many wolves there this morning. More than ever before. And Mrs. Smith told me that they lost two sheep last night. Their last two.” She shook her head. “The poor woman. I’m not sure what they’re going to do.”

Their last two… Things might be fine in Tanglewood, but not beyond it, Finn thought with a sigh. *I wonder if I could have taken more from the Fae and made all of Rirea bloom.*

But that was a vain and foolish thought. So much life taken would definitely have been noticed. Finn waved to let her know he’d heard and understood. The truth was, though, that the wolves didn’t scare him. Not exactly. They never bothered him and sometimes he believed he could hear their thoughts. But he didn’t tell people about this ability, because he wasn’t sure if it was true. More importantly, though, he kept silent because they might be more afraid of him than before. Since the Wall had come up, the wolves had been considered more monsters than simply animals.

He reached the doors to the stable. The earthy scent of warm hay and fresh manure surrounded him. He could hear Jacob forking hay for the horses. He smiled as he pushed open the doors and stepped inside. Jacob’s back was to him. The stable master was about forty years old and he had a special way with animals. His ebony skin was slick with sweat as he worked and there was a wet line along his spine, causing his homespun shirt to stick to his skin.

“You’ve got some good hay there, Sweetfire. Don’t you be looking at me for apples. I don’t have any. I would give them to you if I could, you know that,” Jacob murmured to the gray mare.

Sweetfire nickered as soon as she saw Finn. Jacob turned too with a wide grin on his face.

“Why hello, Finn!” Jacob said before his eyes alighted upon him.

“You always know when it’s me!” Finn complained.

“I know because Sweetfire knows. She perks up in a certain way when it’s you. Only you. You’re one of her favorite people,” Jacob told him as he wiped a hand across his damp brow.

Finn went over to Sweetfire and stroked her head. She nosed his basket, but she wasn’t much into the contents so she then nuzzled his pockets, hoping there might be a treat in there.

“I’m sorry, Sweetfire, I promise to get you something good where we’re going,” he told the mare.

There would, hopefully, be some early berries Finn could find for her. He hated not having a treat for the horse when he had one for himself.

“Are you taking your day?” Jacob’s dark eyes, though, narrowed as he caught sight of the sack over Finn’s shoulders. “No, you’re doing more chores.”

Like Magna, Jacob had been his mother’s faithful servant from before she’d married his stepfather. He, too, knew of Finn’s magic and half-blood status.

“Christopher needs some herbs today, but I am going to take Sweetfire out for a ride and have a picnic,” Finn tried to keep his voice light as he said this.

Jacob shook his head in disgust. He hadn’t fallen for Finn’s attempted lie. “After you made the land bloom today, it felt like old times when your mother was the lady of the estate.”

Finn felt that mixture of guilt and gratefulness that he'd taken--*stolen*--from the Fae. "I'm glad."

"But then I see them running you ragged like always and I realize what an illusion that is!" Jacob continued on.

"They keep my secret safe," Finn quickly reminded Jacob.

Jacob's eyebrows rose. "They keep your secret safe because you keep things going around here, Finn. Truthfully, if they were to reveal who you were now, their heads would be off as quick as any Fae's. They've kept you hidden for years. Don't think King Rohan is going to give them a pass for such a betrayal."

Finn swallowed. He hadn't really thought of it that way. Now that he had, that made sense. "You're probably right. He probably would believe they'd betrayed him. They'd be as dead as me. But… but this is also the only way I get to remain on Tanglewood. The only way we all get to stay together."

Jacob's brow furrowed. "You, Magna and Emmott are family to me as well. But I… I don't know if I want you to keep paying the price you are just to stay here. I want more for you. You're a young man. You should go out on your own. Leave this place and these awful people behind. Go away from Rirea. Head to Bolan or Sultane. A hard worker like you would be welcomed there."

The thought of leaving Tanglewood, and even the Wall, was somehow terrifying. Finn felt bound to each. Besides, his stepfamily would come after him. They needed him, just like Jacob had said. No, his fate was here, tied up with this land and the Wall. But still, Jacob's evident desires for a better life for him warmed Finn.

Finn blinked back unexpected tears at Jacob's words. "Thank you. I appreciate that more than I can say."

Jacob nodded as if hoping for something more from Finn, but Finn didn't know what.

"Let me help you saddle Sweetfire. She is anxious to run today over those newly life-given fields," Jacob finally said.

Between the two of them, Sweetfire was swiftly saddled and Finn was up on her back. She nickered and frisked beneath him as he tied the basket to the saddle.

"Be extra careful in the woods today," Jacob warned.

"Magna told me about the howls and Mrs. Smith's sheep," Finn assured him.

"The wolves are restless. Something has riled them up," Jacob said with a nod.

A jolt of fear went through Finn. Had his actions caused the wolves to be more aggressive than usual?

They'll settle down, Finn told himself. *Everything will be fine.*

He wasn't sure he believed that.

THE LUPINE WOODS

Jacob went back to his work while Finn and Sweetfire were off, galloping through the fields. Finn tipped his head back to feel the spring sunshine on his upturned face. As they raced over the path that cut between two wheat fields, he smelled green growing things. A scent that had not been there before he had used his magic. It was a heady scent and restored him somewhat. But all too soon they came upon the edge of the forest. He slowed Sweetfire to a walk. The mare was jittery as they neared those gnarled trunks.

Finn frowned as he saw the poisonous sap bleeding from them and entering the ground. Everything was twisted or dead beyond the edge of Tanglewood. Would someone wonder how Tanglewood was blooming while everything else was not? He wondered why they hadn't already. But this year it would be completely obvious. What explanation would his stepfamily give that would be believed?

"Come on, Sweetfire, I see a path that will take us where we need to go," he said to the horse and pressed his heels into her sides. "Then, after we're done, we can picnic on the estate. But work first. Then play."

She whinnied, not wanting to go into the woods, but willing to do as he asked. So if he was *really* sure he wanted to go into the nasty forest then she would take him. He guided her to one of the trails that appeared unexpectedly. The trails were said to be made by animals, but these didn't lead to watering holes or dens or spots of untainted grass. No, these paths had a mind of their own. Their twisting, turning nature seemed to want to lead people astray. They would appear and then vanish in an instant.

He well remembered a time several years ago when Christopher had been on a trail that had simply disappeared behind him. If Finn had not been able to navigate the woods even without the misleading trails, Christopher might never have been found. After that misadventure, his stepfather insisted that Finn go get Christopher's herbs. Everyone assumed, including Finn, that his Fae nature allowed him to stay on course in the forest when others could not.

In fact, Finn didn't actually mind the woods that much. He was fascinated by the forest in a sick sort of way. He could almost feel how it had once been. He could imagine how these densely-packed, twisted trunks had once been smooth and fine. He could see how the now poisonous, noxious flowers had once been sweet. And sometimes, when he encountered the rare animal, he could see the clean creature it had once been but was no longer. There were times when he almost felt like he could *fix* what was wrong with everything in Rirea. As arrogant as that sounded, the feeling was so large within him sometimes that he felt he might burst with it. Yet at the same time, until this year, he'd felt quite incapable of doing what needed to be done.

As he and Sweetfire rode underneath the thick, dark branches that formed a canopy over their

heads--blocking out most of the light and leaving them in a sort of green haze--Finn looked for mushrooms that Christopher needed. They had white caps and orange bottoms. They were called rustfires. They were no good to eat, being poisonous, but that was true about pretty much everything in the Lupine Woods unless one looked very carefully. Of course, Christopher's herbs weren't made for cooking, but for magical potions.

Alleged magical potions. All they've ever done is kill things, Finn thought gloomily. *That's hardly magical.*

In addition to the rustfires, Christopher needed a particular black grass called needlehorn and tall, purple flowers that clustered around tree trunks called hell's bells. He also kept a lookout for those berries for Sweetfire. More often than not, what Christopher needed, though, was found nearer the Wall than their property. That usually would have dismayed Finn, but today he truly wanted to see the Wall.

I can feel the line from where I drew the life out of the land and brought it back to me, Finn thought. *It's like a tingling sensation that's running all through me.*

The trail he had located was following the line, which disturbed him slightly. Could the Fae follow this trail to Tanglewood if they left their lands? The trees looked less malignant on that line too. They oozed less black and yellow ichor. There were actually some brighter leaves there. Had he helped the forest? He couldn't imagine cleaning this place of the taint that was upon it despite the sensation that maybe he might know how.

The woods became darker as they got closer to the Wall. The trees seemed to be closing in around him and Sweetfire. A tree that he had sworn to be six-inches from his right calf was suddenly pressed alongside it. Bark and ichor smeared his pant leg and his lips writhed back in disgust. He would have to wash these pants thoroughly when he got back. He was careful not to get any of the sap on his skin. The poisons affected him less than full-blooded humans as well, but the ichor would still cause blisters to open up on his skin and would cause him to itch like mad.

At that moment, Sweetfire let out a soft whinny of fear as they followed a curve in the path. Finn hurriedly looked up. And he saw the reason for her distress. They had found the Wall.

Finn sucked in a sharp breath. He hadn't realized how close they were. The growing darkness and chill should have warned him, but the trees seemed to hide the Wall from his vision until the very last minute every time he came here. He pulled on Sweetfire's reins to slow her to a stop. He hardly had to. She was almost backing away from the magical structure.

He slid off of her back easily and stood beside her, patting her neck. Her nostrils flared and her eyes were huge. He knew he should quickly gather the herbs--he saw everything he needed, even berries for Sweetfire nearby--and get out of there as fast as possible. But he found himself staring into the green, glassy depths of the Wall.

This was where I took the life from. Right on the other side of the Wall.

He walked towards the Wall, unable to stop himself. Sweetfire whinnied again, but Finn couldn't even form the words to tell her that all was okay. The words stuck in his throat like glass shards. His focus was purely on the Wall. Ten feet, five feet, one foot away. His nose was almost pressed against its smooth sides before he finally stopped.

He squinted, trying to see through the material to the other side. Was the forest *clean* there as opposed to the twisted mass it was here? Yes, he thought it was. Had he damaged the land on the other side by taking some of its life? He didn't sense any damage to it. But the Wall made him feel blind. He licked his lips. He was certain he hadn't harmed the land. Surely, he hadn't! He'd taken so very little of the life that roiled there like waves in an endless ocean. He'd feel better if he was sure

though.

Perhaps if I touched the Wall I could sense something more.

He licked his dry lips again and drew in a deep breath to steady himself. He lifted his hands and let them hover two inches from the slick, glassy material. His breathing became shaky as fear spiked in him. He wasn't sure where the fear was coming from. He couldn't see any Fae looking back at him. He really couldn't see anything.

My father is on the other side of the Wall, Finn thought. *What if I could feel him? I'm able to sense Magna, Jacob and Emmott when I wish to. Even now, I know that Magna is in the kitchen and Emmott is working in the vineyard. Jacob's exercising some of the horses. I can even sense my stepfamily! So wouldn't I be able to sense my own blood? If I just reached out… could I feel my father? Would he sense me as well? Would our souls touch and then...*

He shook himself. He was here to confirm he hadn't done any damage to the land. That was all. Not to vainly search for a father he'd never known and who didn't love him.

That's all I'm doing. Just checking to make sure I haven't damaged anything.

Just as Finn was going to lay his hands upon the Wall, there was a thunderous crashing and terrified whinnies. Confused as the horse sounds were not coming from Sweetfire, but in the complete opposite direction, Finn's hands quickly dropped to his sides. He unsheathed the small dagger he always carried at his waist as he spun towards the sounds.

A magnificent black warhorse was trotting towards him. There were leaves and twigs in its mane. Its flanks were quivering. It stopped a few feet from him and stamped its feet and made more whinnies of distress. That was when Finn saw what it was dragging behind it.

A man! An unconscious man!

Finn sheathed the knife and quickly soothed the black warhorse before immediately going to the unconscious man. He was dressed in fine leather armor. Not that it was easy to tell under all the mud, leaves and twigs. The man's right foot had become tangled in the stirrup somehow. Finn quickly unhooked his foot and then moved up the man's body to his face. Finn's heart gave an involuntary flutter as he took in the fine, masculine features.

There was a nasty gash along his forehead near the right temple and bruises, dirt and debris staining his skin. But the man was *beautiful*. He had blond hair like spun gold, a noble nose, a firm jaw, plush lips and high cheekbones. Finn found himself wondering what the color of this man's eyes were.

And then they opened.

And then he knew.

They were the blue of a cloudless summer sky.

The man's plush lips opened and he asked, "Am I… am I dead?"

FIRST MEETING

"Are you… *dead*? What--what do you mean?" The beautiful young man asked and blinked crystalline-green eyes at him. The look in them bespoke confusion and concern. Could a spirit of beauty and the forest be confused by such a question?

"I must be dead, because… you…" Rohan struggled to find the words.

His head throbbed, but it wasn't that which made the words unreachable. This young man was more than beautiful. For a moment, Rohan thought he saw a silvery-green aura around him. And his hands left a trail of sparks in their wake on Rohan's body. Those touches also seemed to ease Rohan's pain.

"Me?" Those green eyes widened farther. Again, a nature spirit would not be so bashful, surely.

"Yes, *you*," Rohan breathed as that silvery-green aura shimmered like witch-fire around the boy. At that moment, he was *certain* that this must be the spirit of the Lupine Woods *before* it was twisted and blasted. "You cannot be real."

An uncertain smile graced the young man's lips. "I am real. You hit your head. Perhaps--"

"No, it's not that." Though his head throbbed painfully then.

Those green eyes narrowed. "How can you tell? Your mind is addled so you cannot possibly know that you're not suffering from an injury."

"Because it's *you*." *He is a spirit. A spirit of the forest. He must be.* But he only said out loud, "I am looking at… such beauty," Rohan stopped as he saw the young man self-consciously tug on his clothes as he noticed the king's regard.

Rags. They're rags more than clothes, Rohan thought. *By the gods, it is a crime for such a lovely creature to be dressed in tatters. And no spirit would be. He is just a young man, and he is right that my head is causing me to think wrong things.*

"Looking at what?" The young man recoiled from him slightly, those green eyes widening in fear, as if Rohan was about to call him a monster.

"Looking at… my rescuer," Rohan said lamely.

The urge to say "spirit of the forest" was strong in him still, despite knowing this was just a human being like himself, because the young man's beauty reminded him of strong, tall trees with dark, green leaves, summer flowers and their heady perfume, and sunshine dappling the grass. From the sweep of his mahogany-colored hair with bronze and gold highlights to the expressive mouth, this young man was more than finely made. He had a noble brow speaking of intelligence and sensitivity. And those sensitive eyes--such a brilliant green--confirmed those attributes. High cheekbones and a firm jaw completed the picture. Normally, Rohan would have commented on his loveliness further, but the young man looked ready to bolt and he didn't want that.

Rohan added, "Basically, the way this day was going I should have woken up looking into the maw of a giant wolf instead of you."

The moment he said *wolf,* the memory of the white wolf flooded Rohan. The red eyes steeped with ancient knowledge and intelligence. The massive, unnatural size. The murderous intent it showed.

The white wolf! Where is it? Did it follow me?

Rohan launched himself upwards, reaching for his sword, Lightbringer, which had somehow not been lost. His hand closed around the hilt, but the world spun sickeningly and it felt like a dagger had been thrust into his brain. His sword fell from his suddenly nerveless fingers. He brought both hands up to his head to stop the spinning, but it was no use. Yet even through his blurred vision and the pain, he could see that, thankfully, there was no white wolf with red eyes anywhere near them. From the silence, there were no wolves at all nearby.

The young man grasped his shoulders, eased him back down and said in that musical, low voice, "You must not move yet. And not so quickly. The size of that gash on your head worries me. Not to mention whatever other injuries you may have since you were dragged by your horse for some time."

Rohan gritted his teeth as waves of pain and nausea flowed through him and shut his eyes as if that could help shut out everything he was feeling. The young man put a delicate hand on his forehead and the pulsing pain immediately began to ease. He drew in some deep breaths as the nausea died away as well. He lay there, prone, allowing those gentle hands to search him for wounds.

"Other than this gash on the head and some small cuts and bruises, you appear unharmed," the young man murmured. "No broken bones. Your armor served you well. As did the gods of luck. Being dragged such a long distance could have ended your life."

"How do you know that? About how long I was dragged?" Rohan asked, daring to crack open his eyelids.

He wanted to look at the young man. He didn't want to miss a moment of this beauty. And he was well rewarded for the young man's head was framed by sunlight sifting through the trees. Again, that silvery-green aura appeared, but just for a moment this time before disappearing.

A faint smile appeared on the young man's lips. "Well, for one, by the amount of sticks in your hair."

Rohan frowned and reached up to touch his hair. His palm was immediately poked by said sticks. He grimaced and tried to rip them out. Unlike the young man, he must look like a forest hermit. The young man surprised him by batting his hands lightly away and pulling out the twigs and leaves with graceful movements.

Everything about him is graceful. I feel like a bull crashing about in comparison, Rohan thought.

"You said *for one*, what is the other reason or reasons you know I was dragged a long way." Rohan found his eyes half shutting again, but this time in pleasure as the young man expertly removed all of the forest debris from his locks.

Another faint smile. Gods, he was already loving those on that fine-featured face!

"No one ventures this close to the Wall," the young man said, his voice dipping slightly as he mentioned the Fae barrier. Those green eyes also flickered over to it as if by simply acknowledging it there was danger.

Rohan grimaced. He should be up, sword in hand, making the young man feel safe from the damned Wall and the occupants on the other side of it. But when he tried to rise again, the world swayed, not so wildly as before but enough that he didn't resist the gentle press of the young man's

hands on his chest. He fell back, panting slightly.

Annoyed at himself, but feeling ridiculously cared for as the young man continued to pluck bits of leaves and bark from his hair, he pointed out, "But you are here."

"I have to be here to gather the herbs that my…" The young man swallowed, which drew Rohan's gaze to the graceful column of his throat. "That the *people* I serve need. So I must be here. But you… you look to be nobility. What would bring you out here?"

He does not know who I am, Rohan realized. *Should I tell him that he has helped his king? No, things will change between us immediately if I reveal my true identity. I would like to just be some lord for a time. I will not lie but I will not volunteer the information.*

"I was hunting wolves, but they ended up hunting me." Rohan sat up again, but this time slowly and far more carefully. "A big white wolf actually."

Those green eyes widened. "A *white* wolf? I have not seen one like that, I do not think."

"Oh, you haven't for you would have remembered him. He was at least twice the size of a normal wolf and had red, glowing eyes like embers in a fire," Rohan said, not wanting this young man to think him bested by a *normal* wolf.

"Red eyes? Like a… *Fae's*?" Alarm caused that pretty face to lose color.

Rohan gently put a hand on the young man's right shoulder. "No Fae have been this side of the Wall in over a decade. You need not be afraid."

But the young man, though he nodded slowly, did not seem to believe that they were safe from the Fae nonetheless.

"What is your name?" Rohan asked.

"Finn."

"Finn," Rohan rolled the name off his tongue. "That's a nice name."

"And yours?" Finn asked.

Here was the kicker. He had told himself he was not going to lie. But the moment he said his name surely the young man would guess who he was! But, then again, outside of his court, few of his people had seen his face. He gave no speeches. He hunted in the woods and toured the towns incognito with a hood over his face. So perhaps Finn would not jump to the conclusion that he was *King* Rohan, instead of *Lord* Rohan.

"Rohan," he said.

Finn smiled. "Like our king!"

Rohan let out a self-conscious laugh. "Yes, exactly."

But Finn did not seem to be making the connection. Rohan could not blame him. Who would think to meet the King of Rirea in the middle of the Lupine Woods having been dragged by his horse? No one.

Thankfully.

There was a sudden boom of thunder and crackle of lightning. Finn glanced skyward with alarm. Rohan did as well. It was dangerous to get caught in the rain in the Lupine Woods. The water mixed with the poisonous ichor that oozed from the trees and bubbled up from the roots. It soaked into boots and clothes, scalding and blistering skin. With the young man's tattered attire, he would be burned for sure.

"We must get out of the woods!" Rohan struggled to his feet.

This time the young man did not urge him back down, but helped him up. Finn was surprisingly strong for such a lithe figure. But Rohan's weight seemed to cause the young man no issues.

"There is no time! We'll be caught in the downpour before we make it halfway out," Finn said

with an authority that showed he knew the woods well.

"We cannot stay here," Rohan said as he cast about for some shelter.

"No, you're right, but I know a place. An old, abandoned cabin not too far from here. There's even a lean-to for the horses so they'll be fine as well," Finn said even as he darted towards the Wall.

"What are you doing? Shouldn't we be going to this cabin?" Rohan asked as the young man expertly plucked mushrooms, long grass, berries and a few other herbs.

"These will be destroyed by the rain. If I don't come back with them, I will get in trouble," Finn answered. Rohan frowned deeply. The thought of anyone doing violence to this gentle young man felt *wrong* to him. Considering Finn's looks, he worried that the violence might be accompanied by sexual threats. But then Finn was rising, having shoved the ingredients in a sack he had over one shoulder. "There! Done! Let's go!"

But just as Finn said these words, he froze. Rohan frowned and was about to ask what the matter was now when he, too, saw what Finn already had. There was movement beyond the Wall. He could barely discern two figures on the other side of the jade-colored material. But they were there. They were...

Fae!

There were gold will-o-wisps that floated beside the Faes' heads. They cast as wide and strong a glow as torches. That was what was allowing them to see the Fae so clearly through the smoky, green glass. One was kneeling at the base of the Wall. The other was standing behind the kneeling figure, arms outstretched to either side, hands limned with blue fire. Rohan felt a cold chill go through him. The wolf with the red eyes and now these two figures could only mean one thing. The Fae were planning some kind of invasion of Rirea!

Seeing Fae for the first time since his parents' deaths was… he couldn't quite discern his emotions. There were too many and they were too large to truly think about. The Fae had killed his family. They had put up the cursed Wall that was slowly killing his kingdom, inch by inch. Rohan's hand strayed towards the sword that was still on the ground. But he already knew that the blade was worthless against the Wall. But could the Fae walk right through it? He lunged towards Lightbringer and swept it up, ready to defend against them. But the Fae went about their business as if they were not there.

Maybe they cannot see us. We have no torches. His eyes narrowed. *Or they think us so unimportant that they feel no need to acknowledge us.*

"They know," Finn breathed.

"What?"

Rohan snapped his head towards the young man. There was the most peculiar expression on Finn's beautiful face. It was a mixture of dread and yearning. Despite himself, Rohan understood both emotions. The Fae haunted the people of Rirea. They were both magic and monsters.

"They don't appear to know we're here, Finn. We need to get to that cabin before the rain comes," Rohan said.

He was loath to leave the Fae doing whatever it was they were up to. But the rain could kill in the Lupine Woods. Lightning streaked across the sky followed by a rumble of thunder that vibrated the ground.

If that lightning keeps up they will see us soon enough, Rohan thought. *Better to steal away before they realize that they've been seen.*

Finn shook himself and nodded. "You're right. They're just… just investigating something," Finn said and dragged his gaze away from the figures. "We should go--go quickly."

And with that, the young man grabbed the reins of both their horses and started leading them parallel to the wall, but Finn made it so that there were thick tree trunks between them and the green structure as if hiding them from any other Fae eyes. Rohan sheathed Lightbringer and followed after the young man more slowly. His head still ached. His whole body did, but he was used to working

through pain. His mind, though, was whirring with dread.

He thought of his uncle's suggestion regarding marriage and King Tearlach. If the Fae truly were going to invade Rirea, he might have no choice but to reach out to the Achuvien leader and make some kind of *deal*. His stomach curdled at the thought, especially as he took in the slender figure before him who led Tempest easily, even though his warhorse usually despised anyone but him and the stable master. No one and nothing could be more different from Tearlach than Finn.

Tempest kept nuzzling the back of Finn's head. Finn's horse nickered jealously and nudged Tempest away from Finn. Rohan couldn't help but grin. The horses were fighting over the lithesome young man. He wondered if he was going to have to fight with the beasts to get some of Finn's attention.

Just as the stinging drops of rain were beginning to fall, a tiny wooden cabin with the lean-to that Finn described appeared before them. It was in a small clearing where some relatively healthy grass did still grow. The cabin's wood sides had grayed with age, but the roof looked intact and that was all they needed for now.

Rohan helped Finn get the horses underneath the safety of the lean-to. Finn grabbed a wicker basket and threadbare blanket from his saddle while Rohan unhooked the saddlebags from Tempest. The horse gave a thankful whinny. Rohan reached into his pack and brought out an apple and a carrot. Finn was already splitting some of the berries he'd found between the horses. But at the sight of the sweet treats in his hands both horses immediately began snuffling around him.

Finn laughed. "Sweetfire, don't be a piglet. Those are for your friend."

"No, no, share and share alike. Which would Sweetfire like better?" Rohan asked regarding the apple and the carrot.

For some reason, Finn blushed. "The… the, ah, apple. Unless that is your horse's favorite."

"The apple it is." Rohan handed over the apple to Finn.

Their fingers brushed and he felt an electric spark fly between them. Uncharacteristically, he quickly turned and fed the carrot to Tempest who crunched it eagerly. Finn fed Sweetfire the apple. Both horses were taken care of for now, so the two of them hustled into the cabin.

"I stored some wood by the fireplace last time I was here so we should be set even if it rains for some time," Finn said to him as they both entered the gloomy interior.

It took Rohan's eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, but Finn seemed to know his way around even in the dark. The young man went by the corner near the fireplace and crouched down, loading his arms with wood.

Rohan looked around. Flashes of lightning showed through the spaces between boards that made up the walls. But they were safe enough from the rain and the ichor. The bursts of lightning showed Rohan that the cabin was a one-room shack with a crude fireplace and a wooden floor that seemed sound. He saw sparks flying as Finn used flint and tinder to start a fire in the fireplace. There was a snap and crackle as some dry straw caught and flames licked the logs that Finn had expertly placed.

The warm, golden glow the flames gave off showed that the room was even shabbier than it had appeared in the dark. There was a broken-down bed with a horsehair mattress that had long rotted into mush in the corner. A rough-hewn table and chairs lay broken in the opposite corner. Finn, though, seemed immune to the dismal surroundings, and, in truth, the young man's beauty lit up the space for Rohan, too. He wondered what they would do while the rain poured down from the sky.

I have no idea if he would enjoy the touch of another man, Rohan reminded himself. *Finn seems innocent yet it seems impossible that he's been left alone. I will not be another that stalks him. If he shows interest, then… then I will pursue.*

Finn was spreading out a thin blanket on the floorboards in front of the fire and neatly sitting the wicker basket in the center. Rohan could not help but, once again, admire the graceful and economical way Finn moved. The young man, who had been busy with his tasks, suddenly looked up at him. Their gazes met and both of them blushed. Rohan couldn't remember the last time he had blushed. On Finn it was pretty. On him, he guessed he looked like he was coming down with something.

I think he still finds me attractive, though, Rohan thought. *There is heat in those green eyes.*

"You should sit, Rohan," Finn said and Rohan was surprised at the shiver of pleasure it gave him to hear his name in Finn's liquid accent. "You're hardly recovered from what's happened."

"I've suffered worse than this." Rohan gestured to the wound on his forehead, but he did sit down on the proffered blanket. He stretched his legs out towards the fire and tried not to groan in pleasure as his overworked muscles got a rest and the heat of the fire ran over his legs.

Finn lightly sank down onto his knees. He had fished out a water skin from the basket and was soaking a bit of cloth. He reached over and grasped Rohan's chin to hold his face steady as he dabbed at the wound on Rohan's head. Rohan hissed softly.

"I'm sorry." Finn winced in empathy. "Normally, I would have looked for some whistlewood to dull the pain while I did this, but we didn't have time"

"I was trying to act all brave and manly to impress you, but here I am complaining of a little dabbing!" Rohan grinned as he liked the feel of Finn's hands on him even though his wound stung.

Finn smiled and shook his head. "You have impressed me. I'm surprised you are able to be up and around with the size of this gash on your head."

"I think it may look worse than it is," Rohan said, even as he had a slightly vain moment wondering if Finn could at all find him attractive, bloody, bruised, and with twig-filled hair. But he shook that aside. Finn's eyes had told him that he did.

It had been some time since he'd bedded anyone. He couldn't imagine not trying to be with this beautiful young man as they waited for the rain to stop so long as Finn was interested. It would be a most pleasant way to spend the afternoon, but he found himself oddly tongue-tied around Finn and didn't know what to say that would result in such pleasure. Finn moved Rohan's head so that he could see more of the wound in the firelight. He looked critically at it, but finally nodded and stopped dabbing.

"Better?" Rohan asked.

"I should be asking you that."

"Your ministrations have aided me," Rohan assured him.

"I have some food. It should be more than enough for two. I think eating might help you recover," Finn said as he leaned over the wicker basket.

Finn brought out a small loaf of bread, a tiny pat of butter, a small pot of honey and a few strips of dried beef. It would not be enough for *one*, let alone *two* people. Rohan could have eaten that in less time than it took Finn to unpack it. But the proud look on Finn's face had Rohan firmly shutting his mouth.

He noted how *thin* Finn was. And, for a moment, he imagined feeding Finn bread slathered with butter and the fine honey from Reave Castle's grounds. He went farther and imagined that there would be a plump haunch of venison, still dripping grease, straight from the spit and he would cut pieces off and urge Finn to devour them. They would drink the dark red wine that his father had stored in the cellars, instead of letting it gather dust.

He came back to himself as he saw Finn hesitate as he separated the loaf into two very unequal pieces. The young man kept the smaller one for himself. He did the same with the dried meat.

Everything in Rohan screamed out that the young man should eat it all. But he knew that Finn would likely be offended and hurt if he refused to eat any. So as Finn's head was turned away getting a little knife for the butter, Rohan smoothly moved the larger amount of food so that it was in front of Finn while he had the lesser portion.

When Finn turned back, he froze in confusion that the portion in front of him was larger. He looked over at Rohan and a deep frown appeared on those pretty lips. But in the firelight, Rohan could see the underlying *want* in those green eyes. Finn had been starving for years and he had been able to do nothing about it.

Just like all of my people because of the damned Wall! Rohan thought.

"You are injured, you should have more," Finn said, realizing what Rohan had done.

"On the contrary, I only feel slightly peckish. You look like you could use something to eat," Rohan said kindly.

Finn self-consciously drew the collar of his ragged shirt up to his chin and Rohan winced. He hadn't meant to suggest that Finn was *too* thin, though he was. He just wanted the young man to eat more. He could, after all, look forward to a large dinner that night. His uncle would be so relieved to find him relatively unharmed that he would insist Rohan be pampered within an inch of his life when he returned.

Rohan frowned at that. Uncle Hugues would be desperately wondering where he was and if he was all right. Even with the storm, his uncle and the Guard might have foolishly continued searching for him in the woods. He was tempted to get up right then and there to go look for them instead.

"What is it?" Finn asked.

"I wasn't alone in my hunting today. My uncle and… and others were with me," Rohan explained. "I just realized that they are likely worrying about me."

"I know you are concerned about them, but going out in the storm would not be wise," Finn told him. "I am betting that they called off the search until the storm passes in any case and sought shelter themselves."

Rohan grimaced. He was the king. The Guard would be beside themselves. His uncle would wonder if his only living relative was dead. The likelihood of them giving up the search was slim to none. But Finn was right that he could do nothing about it. He and Tempest would be poisoned long before they made it to the edge of the forest. He just hoped that the Guard and Uncle Hugues had retreated to somewhere safe.

"Yes, yes, you are likely right," Rohan said with a heavy sigh.

Now he felt foolish and selfish for thinking only of having this time alone with the beautiful boy. He rubbed near the gash on his forehead and winced. Sometimes he forgot his position. Sometimes he did so because he *wished* to.

"Tell me about your uncle," Finn said.

The young man's hand was drifting to the smaller piece of bread, so to stop that Rohan picked it up and scraped the smallest bit of butter and honey on it, before popping it into his mouth. Finn picked up the larger piece and began to butter it with slightly shaking hands.

How hungry is he?

From Finn's clothes, it was clear that he was a servant. Yet his manner of speech was highly educated, which would play against that. Perhaps he was from a noble family that had fallen on hard times? Finn looked up at him expectantly and Rohan realized he hadn't answered the question.

"Oh, my uncle! He… he helps me run my family's estate since my parents' deaths," Rohan answered. This wasn't a lie. That was what his uncle had done, except instead of an estate, he had

helped Rohan run the *kingdom*. "He's a scholar and very wise. I rely upon his judgment for most everything."

Except for getting married, but he might be right about that too.

Finn smiled softly. "That's wonderful that you have each other to rely upon."

"Yes, I do think I would be lost without him," Rohan said and he meant it. His uncle's words this morning seemed more prescient than ever. "And what about you? Are your parents alive? Do you have siblings?"

Finn shook his head. "I'm an only child. My mother died when I was five. I never knew my father. I live on the estate where they… uhm, well, I'm a servant there."

Rohan read between the lines. Finn was an orphan and had somehow ended up serving rather than ruling his mother's estate. Maybe because he was a bastard child or perhaps a lack of funds. Rohan frowned. Whoever was running that estate was mistreating this young man.

"What estate?" Rohan asked.

There was a long pause as Finn fussed with the bread and butter. He noted how Finn ate only a little at a time and seemed to be savoring every crumb of food. A flare of anger went through him as he realized just how much Finn was deprived. Rohan took only a sliver of the dried beef and surreptitiously slid the rest into Finn's pile.

"It's a small estate. You wouldn't know it," Finn finally said.

He doesn't want to tell me the name of it. Why, I wonder?

"Well, I am sorry about your family, Finn," Rohan said softly.

Finn nodded. "The other servants are very kind though. They are like a family to me. We take care of one another. Magna packed this for me." Finn indicated the basket with pride. "She's so generous and kind."

Again, Rohan had to bite back the words that wanted to come out of his mouth that what was in the basket was miniscule, not enough for a growing young man, not enough for anyone.

"Are you married?" Finn suddenly asked, green eyes intent behind long bangs.

Rohan gave out a bark of laughter.

Finn flushed. "I-I'm sorry if that's funny. I just--"

"No, Finn, your question wasn't funny at all." Rohan reached across and touched Finn's left forearm briefly.

Finn flushed again and went still at his touch. "But you laughed."

"It's just the irony of everything. Before the fight with the wolves that brought me to you," Rohan said and there was a tingle inside of him as he said that last bit, "my uncle had been stressing with me the need to get married for the sake of the estate."

The amusement he felt about the juxtaposition of Finn's question and his uncle's words died though as he studied Finn nibbling at his little meal and acting like it was a feast. Was he being selfish thinking that Rirea could somehow recover on its own? Did he simply not want to be tied down to another person for fear of losing them like he'd lost his parents? Or, gods forbid, did he have some niggling desire for love like his parents had?

No, surely not!

"Do you not want to marry?" Finn asked, gazing up at him through his lashes.

The question was so direct that it stunned him for a moment.

"The types of partners I am presented with are…" He licked his lips. "Well, they aren't love matches, but ones that would be strategic for the health of my estate."

Finn nodded in understanding. "Is your estate… failing like most are in Rirea?"

Rohan bristled and went to bark back that Rirea was *not* failing! But he stopped himself. Finn was one of his subjects. The young man was telling him what he honestly thought. He should listen. There was no knowledge that he was a king to sweeten the young man's opinion.

"Yes, things are not good, but I want to find a way to turn them around on my own. Not beg a partner for money, food or other resources," Rohan explained. "I feel… I feel that would *lower* the estate."

Finn considered this, chewing his bread and dried meat. "I don't mean to tell you what to think."

"But?" Rohan smiled. This was much like his uncle was with him. Leaving the "buts" out of his sentences but still implying them.

Finn flushed and ducked his head. "I truly don't!"

"I want to hear what you have to say," Rohan assured him.

Finn hesitated, but then said carefully, "I would say that you shouldn't think about such assistance as *lowering* your estate, but as *adding* to its resources. An estate does not stand on its own. It is its people, the land, animals and what it produces. If you can *add* to any of those things then all prosper."

"Pride," Rohan muttered as he absorbed Finn's words and saw clearly what his problem was.

"What?"

"It's my pride. I think that is what is getting in the way," Rohan answered with a bitter purse of lips. "Mostly, in any case. My parents never had to ask anyone for help. They were the people to whom others asked assistance."

"Then surely those your parents helped will help you now, eager to repay the favor," Finn suggested.

"I suppose some might. But what my estate needs may be *greater* than any repayment could cover. So I would be the one in debt," Rohan answered with a sigh. "Imagine lying beside someone for whom you owe so much and have no other feelings for. How can regard grow?"

"Gratefulness," Finn responded.

"Only so long as the other person doesn't take advantage and, quite frankly, none of them would be able to resist doing so." Rohan grimaced.

"If they loved you--"

"Love? You, too, speak of love," Rohan laughed mirthlessly even as his eyes caught Finn's once more. Caught and *held*. "I imagine that you could inspire love, Finn, but there is none for me."

Finn's lips parted and his pink tongue came out to lick them. His green eyes kept meeting and looking away from Rohan's. The urge to lean in and kiss those lips was huge. It would have been what Rohan would have done with anyone else. Love them and then leave them. He would have a sweet memory of Finn and would never see the young man again.

Except…

"I'm a servant, Rohan. I have no family, no estate, nothing to my name," Finn finally said and there was something so bleak in his green eyes. "Someone would have to be *insane* to love me."

FIRSTS

Seeing what he thought was pity in Rohan's intense, blue eyes, Finn quickly looked away and fussed with his bread and butter. What did he expect when he said something so bleak even if it was the truth? But a handsome, powerful lord like Rohan would have no idea of what it was like to never even have the choice to marry or not. Finn had never even been kissed!

Thinking of kissing and having Rohan so close was a mistake though. Heat bloomed between Finn's thighs and he didn't think he'd stopped blushing from the moment he'd met Rohan. Except for when the Fae appeared.

It must have been a coincidence! It must be! And even if they sensed that little bit of stolen life, they could never believe I was behind it, he reminded himself fiercely. *I'm not going to think of it. I'm just going to enjoy this time with Rohan.*

He had never met anyone like this powerful, handsome man. Rohan's easy confidence with his body--the way he moved even when injured--was incredibly intriguing. Rohan strode through the world, daring things to get out of his way, while Finn glided, trying not to leave a mark. Rohan appeared to be all about leaving marks. But what saddened Finn was that even this influential man of action and lord of an estate was still not completely free.

He doesn't have someone who can make his estate bloom, Finn thought. *He must try and purchase what my stepfamily takes from me.*

"My mother had to marry someone who could help her financially," Finn said slowly. "She did not love him, but she hoped… hoped he could be a good provider for us."

His stepfather though had exaggerated his wealth and had soon exhausted it in trying to make Tanglewood grander than the estates around it in order to gain respect that wasn't afforded him because he had been born the son of a merchant. But from Finn's observations of their noble neighbors, no amount of money would have been enough. Though he did not think Rohan would have cared who his stepfather had been born to. He would have looked at the man he was and judged him thus.

Rohan's gaze swept over him and Finn keenly felt the shabbiness of his clothes and the thinness of his body. He almost tried to cover himself, but that would just draw more attention to what he was lacking.

"It did not work as she hoped?" Rohan guessed.

"No," Finn answered simply.

He couldn't tell Rohan about his Fae father or his own Fae magic or any of it which might explain why his stepfather had behaved as he had towards Finn. Maybe it was just an illusion to think, absent his magic, that Gerard could have loved and thought of Finn as his own son. But, then again, maybe if

he had not been presented with the sheer *alienness* of Finn's heritage, he could have put himself in the place of an absent father.

"And your father?" Rohan asked.

"He was gone before I was born," Finn explained, but that, too, wasn't an explanation.

His father was behind the Wall with all the other hated Fae. For all he knew, one of the Fae at the Wall could have been the man whose seed helped to create him. He often wondered if he would recognize something of himself in his father if he were to meet the Fae. They could not have the same eyes as all Fae eyes were red, a brilliant, glowing crimson. Fae were supposed to be very fair, but Finn had an olive cast to his skin. But, perhaps, the color of his hair or the shape of his chin would be reflected back to him and he would know that *this* Fae was related to him by blood. And that had him wondering if his father was married and had other children. Half-brothers and sisters that he would never meet, never learn to love, and have them love him back.

"I am sorry," Rohan said simply.

Finn blinked, dragging himself out of the whirlpool of despair that sometimes threatened him when he thought of his absent father. "Thank you, but I get by. As I said, I have the other servants as my friends and family. They are good to me."

Rohan looked like he might not agree. "I am glad of that. But I think your mother's tale is a cautionary one for me. I would never wish to marry a person who would treat any child of mine unkindly."

Unkindly? Finn considered this description of how his stepfather was with him. *What an interesting way to put it.*

"If she had lived, I believe things would have turned out differently." Finn again looked away. Gerard had loved her enough to ignore a half-blood son. "I am sure when it comes down to it, you will have many choices as to whom to marry, Rohan. I wouldn't worry."

Finn had no doubt that the handsome, confident lord with the laughing smile and curious mind would have his pick of husbands or wives. Even with an estate in need of assistance, Rohan would be the real prize.

"Look at us!" Rohan suddenly laughed. "Talking about love and marriage with a frankness that I never have with anyone else. Even though we are mostly strangers. I swear though that it is easier talking to you than it has been… well, to talk to anyone, Finn. Even with my uncle with whom I share everything."

"You're the lord of the manor. Honesty is too dangerous to give you normally. People fear giving offense," Finn said with a shrug as he nibbled on more of the bread. "They risk too much by doing so."

"You're right at that. But you aren't fearful of me," Rohan pointed out.

Finn's head jerked up in sudden alarm and he studied Rohan's handsome face. Had he forgotten himself? Rohan had seemed so friendly and without pretense. He would have held his tongue normally, but Rohan seemed to invite honesty. But maybe he had misread the situation altogether. Maybe he had offended without realizing it.

His stepfather's voice seemed to ring in his ears, "Finn, how could you be so stupid? If you had any sense, you should be charming and servile to this man! Maybe he could aid us! Get your brothers some wives!"

Yet Finn would never do something like that. He would be respectful and kind and do no harm if he could help it, but he would never befriend someone because of what they could offer him.

But then Rohan put his fears at ease, "And I am so glad you are not afraid. That you treat me…

like anyone else."

Relief spread through Finn's chest. "Not like anyone else. You're brave and that is very rare."

"How are you certain of that?" Rohan lifted a dark-blonde eyebrow that gave him a rakish air.

Finn found himself blushing. "You were hunting in the woods."

"True. But you also found me off my saddle, unconscious and being dragged by my horse." More eyebrow movements.

Finn laughed. He couldn't help himself. "Well, being *brave* doesn't mean being *skilled*!"

He immediately regretted such words--as what lord wants to be called unskilled at hunting or at anything at all? His stepfather would not allow such a comment to stand--but Rohan just chuckled and looked well-pleased.

"You are so right." Rohan nodded. "I am brave, or perhaps foolish, and most unskilled."

"Somehow I doubt that very much." This statement had Rohan smiling. Finn asked, "What brought you out hunting wolves today? Most people won't set foot in the forest, because of them, but you went out seeking them!"

"To protect the farms along the border," Rohan stated.

Finn frowned. "Your farms?"

Rohan shook his head. "No, I live… ah, nearer the coast."

"So you hunt the wolves to save other people's farms?" Finn's eyes widened.

He knew that his stepfather and stepbrothers hardly represented all of humanity, but plenty of lords and ladies had come to Tanglewood--intrigued by Tanglewood's lushness--and they had been just as bad as Gerard, Miles or Christopher. Well, no one was quite as bad as Christopher. They certainly wouldn't have gone out to save anyone else's farms! That was for certain.

But Rohan nodded again. His eyes were on the doorway where the rain was coming down in great sheets. The ground had turned into a muddy sludge and Finn could see the swirls of darker colors in the water from it mixing with the toxic ichor. They and the horses would have grown sick indeed if they had not taken shelter. He worried that the runoff from the woods would poison some of Tanglewood's land again even after he had made it bloom.

"For every wolf I hunt down, I can be certain that an ewe will be protected and a family might not starve," Rohan said softly.

Finn put the last bit of bread in his mouth. He licked his fingers greedily to make sure that he didn't miss any of the creamy butter or sticky honey. Rohan seemed intent on not taking any of the food and Finn was too hungry to offer to share again. He knew that Rohan was not going to go hungry. He had an estate to get back to. And he had to choose someone to marry. So it was not wrong to be a little greedy at that moment and eat all that Magna had prepared for him.

Stolen food like the stolen life, Finn thought and found himself adding, *The Fae were looking for me*.

These thoughts came unbidden and Finn had to swallow hard. He found himself saying, "It is not the wolves' fault. They are desperate because there is no game. The ichor makes them grow even madder. I wish there was another way, other than killing them, to make the people safe."

Rohan's blue eyes were upon him again, a half-smile on his lips. "I wish there were, too. They are magnificent creatures." His expression hardened though as he added, "But things are out of balance because of the Wall. Rirea is dying while the Fae take everything and leave us nothing. Even the wolves are destroyed by their actions."

Finn swallowed again. This wasn't a unique take on the Fae. He'd thought it too. Were not Magna, Emmott and Jacob starving because of the Wall? He couldn't believe that any place was

naturally as twisted as Rirea was becoming. The Wall had to be responsible for the changes in the land. Again, his mind went to the shadowy figures that they had seen through the jade gloom.

They know! They know something has been stolen from them!

"In your hunts, have you ever seen the Fae--the Fae so close to the Wall before?" Finn asked. "I've never glimpsed one myself and I am often sent here to gather ingredients.

Rohan shook his head and his plush mouth compressed into a thin line. "No. Never."

"What do you suppose they were doing?"

Finn knew well enough what they were doing, but he somehow vainly hoped that Rohan might have a better and different explanation.

"Maybe they were scouting out areas to attack from," Rohan said, his expression growing grimmer.

"What?! But why? We have nothing they could want!" Finn clutched the front of his shirt and felt the material start to give. He quickly released it, worried there would be holes where his fingernails had dug into the cloth.

"Rirea is weaker than it's ever been because of the Wall. The Fae could just bring down the Wall and march on through," Rohan answered, his gaze distant as if he could see the lines and lines of Fae Battle Mages. "Conquering us easily."

Would my father be among those that came? Finn wondered with dread. *One of the Fae's fearsome Battle Mages dressed all in magical armor with a grim expression on his face?*

Finn shook himself. This really was not the time to think of his nameless father. Besides, even if his father were one of those dread Fae warriors, he would just as likely kill Finn, too, without a second thought. There would be no knowledge of who Finn was. There would be no hesitation. Finn had thought he had stamped out any hope he had in his Fae father, but he had thought more about him today than he had in years.

"King Rohan won't let the Fae overrun us," Finn said stoutly, not because he completely believed it but because he hoped it was true.

Rohan surprised him by smiling sadly for a moment. "You think so? You think the king could protect us all?"

"Obviously, I do not know him. I've never even seen him," Finn said as he put a bit of dried meat in his mouth and chewed nervously. "But they say he is very brave."

"Yes, but, as you so rightly pointed out, he may be *brave* but he may not be *skilled*," Rohan teased.

Finn though quickly got out, "I would never say that about the king!"

Rohan laughed and seemed even more delighted than he had earlier, shaking off his gloom. He reached up and touched Finn's left cheek, drawing a finger down to his jaw. "If you did, you would only be saying the truth."

Finn's heart was in his throat with that touch. He had never allowed anyone to touch him this way. The fact that they were talking about the *king* and touching like this seemed incredibly foolish and dangerous. Who was he to judge the king? Finn was supposedly King Rohan's enemy, because of his blood. But that was only because the Fae had killed the king's parents and wouldn't Finn have felt the same towards them if he were in the king's shoes? Everyone would feel the same. The hatred was justified.

"I believe in the king," Finn stated firmly. "After what happened to his parents, I believe he would fight until his last breath against the Fae. He would do whatever it took to stop them."

Rohan stared at him, without blinking, and Finn could see that there was so much going on behind

those blue eyes. He had no idea what Rohan was thinking. Finally, Rohan nodded.

"I believe you're right. He would be protecting his people and getting revenge all at the same time," Rohan's voice was soft, distant in a way. "Hatred and love all wrapped together."

Finn shifted a little as he asked, "What do you suppose caused King Thalanil to kill them? Queen Cyrille and King Alexandre, I mean."

He had never brought this subject up with anyone else. He couldn't. Everyone from Magna to Christopher knew he was Fae. They would think he was looking for something to excuse the Fae king's actions. But to find logic, where none existed, was a vain exercise. The Fae, afterall, were quixotic in their temperament, weren't they? He had no reason to think that Rohan would believe differently. But the fact that the lord was willing to discuss the Fae, at all, seemed momentous.

Rohan stirred and blinked as if coming out of deep thoughts. "It was only the three of them up on Twilgate Cliff."

Both of them automatically, and unconsciously, turned their gazes in the direction of the cliff. To the West. It was the highest point in Rirea, overlooking Reave Castle and the Iron Sea. It had always been a windswept, desolate place, but also a place of strange power. It was where nature ruled. Still, why the three monarchs should have met up there was anyone's guess.

"We only know the aftermath of what happened, but not what precipitated it," Rohan told him, but it seemed he was more speaking to himself.

"So we'll never know then," Finn said quietly. "Two dead and one hidden behind the Wall that he erected."

"Well, one thing I believe that we can rule out is that King Thalanil simply killed them out of pique," Rohan said with a twist of his lips.

"But aren't Fae… fey?" Finn lifted one shoulder elegantly upwards.

"No. This idea that the Fae kill because they are ruled by their emotions is… wrong." Rohan's lips flattened again. "They are, in fact, almost always in control of themselves. To our human way of thinking, they would appear cold, almost without emotion. They do not share warmth with those they do not know and trust. Which is likely why humans rarely saw them as anything but merciless."

"So they don't just murder people?" Finn felt a wave of… what? Relief? He had never desired to kill anyone. He had always assumed it was because of his mother, but maybe his Fae side wasn't murderous either. Magna had told him that her experiences with the Fae had been good, but she might have just been being kind.

"Oh, they do. They will kill you as soon as look at you, if you're human, that is," Rohan said with a wave of his hand through the air like it was a blade.

Finn wrapped his slender arms around himself as though chilled. "That's… that's horrible."

"They see us as lesser beings. Our mortality, our emotionalism, our very way of being is considered weak and ugly in their eyes." A shudder went through Rohan. "So while I am certain that there was no fit of pique that caused the king and queen's deaths, I have no doubt that King Thalanil cared *little* and thought *less* about killing them."

Finn tightened his arms around himself. "I've never heard the Fae described that way. That is worse than killing someone out of sudden anger or offense."

"What is even more awful is that the king and queen must have trusted Thalanil. For they came to meet him in that godforsaken spot alone. No Guard with them. Why would they go there? Alone and unarmed?" Rohan murmured. "What, other than friendship and trust, could have brought them to such a forlorn and desolate place?"

"There must have been a good reason. There must have been!"

"Indeed, but it must also have been a *lie*. I believe…" Rohan's lips quivered. "I believe the Fae king lured them there, intending to kill them all along."

"But why?"

"Rirea was once the Fae's. It was a sacred space for them. But humans came and took it. After the War, we kept it, but I think King Thalanil never got over its loss and he wanted it back. *Wants* it back," Rohan stated and clenched his jaw.

"That's why you think those Fae at the Wall were looking for places to invade? Because they want their land back?"

Finn's heart clenched. Had he given the Fae an excuse to start the war they'd been waiting for? If the Fae truly were looking to find a reason to invade Rirea, he may have given it by stealing that little bit of life.

"You're trembling!" Rohan said as he frowned looking at Finn's threadbare tunic and pants. "You must be freezing. Those clothes of yours barely cover anything. Hold on."

Rohan leaned over his saddlebags. He pulled out a cloak. It was made of gray wolf's fur and had a crimson, silk lining. Finn had never seen anything so fine let alone had worn such a thing! But Rohan draped it over his shoulders and drew it around him as if it were natural for him to wear it. It was so big that he was engulfed by it. Only his head stuck out of the fur at the top. Rohan laughed. He cupped Finn's cheeks.

"You look like a little bird in a nest!" Rohan chuckled.

Finn stroked the silk and fur. "I've never touched anything so fine! Not even my mother…" He quickly stopped. He could not talk about his mother having any wealth. That would raise questions about who he really was and he could not allow that to get out. He was struck off the books. He wasn't listed as her son. Finally, he just added lamely, "My mother had a fine cloak but nothing like this."

Rohan cocked his head to the side and seemed to read more into what Finn had just said. "It suits you. You must keep it."

Finn's eyes went huge. "W-what? No! I couldn't!"

He went to take it off and shove it back at Rohan. The lord grasped his forearms and stopped him.

"You saved my life, Finn," Rohan said.

"I did nothing! You would have woken with or without me. And you got here of your own accord," Finn told him.

The silk was both cooling and warming. The fur was incredibly soft against his cheeks. He had never felt so comfortable, unless he stretched his mind back to his old room with the four-poster bed, loaded with blankets and pillows and a fireplace that was never short of wood.

"I disagree with you utterly. You saved me." Rohan was smiling in that way that had Finn's heart thumping harder. "But, even if you won't admit your good deed, you won't deny me the pleasure of giving you a gift, will you?"

Finn blinked. A gift freely given could not be refused. But his stepfamily would wonder where he had gotten something like this cloak. They would insist on doing something shameful like coming to Rohan to get more gifts, or sending Finn to do the same. Or maybe one of them would simply sell the cloak so that they could have a little more spending money. All of those possibilities were horrendous to him.

But perhaps I could hide it from them.

Finn imagined being able to sleep wrapped in this cloak. He would be so warm and comfortable!

But more importantly, he would be able to remember this day with Rohan, a day where a beautiful lord treated him as a person and not a thing. His mind, unbidden, suddenly offered him another idea for how to use that cloak. He saw himself and Rohan, naked and entangled together, on top of the fur and silk with the firelight gilding their skin. Heat bloomed once more on his cheeks and between his thighs.

Finally, he said rather breathlessly, "Thank you, Rohan. I will cherish it."

Rohan's hands were cupping his cheeks. His thumbs stroked along the sharp planes of Finn's cheekbones. He gently traced the orbits of Finn's eyes and smoothed his brows. Finn's breath quickened.

"You are so beautiful," Rohan stated simply. "That was the first thing I thought when I saw you above me. It was why I believed I was dead. Because no one should be so lovely and mortal."

Finn swallowed deeply and his gaze flickered from Rohan's eyes to his mouth.

I want to kiss him. I want him to kiss me, Finn thought.

"I'm not," Finn breathed.

"You *are*," Rohan insisted softly. "And then, after speaking to you, I realized the beauty is not skin deep. That is so rare."

"I'm not," Finn repeated, but then Rohan's right thumb glided over his lips, silencing the doubt.

"You are," Rohan whispered again.

And then they were leaning towards one another. It was Finn's first kiss and it was better than he could have imagined.

LOVEMAKING IN THE RAIN

Rohan's lips were firm yet soft against Finn's. The lord's tongue teased Finn's lips to open. Finn yielded to his wordless request and then their tongues were tangling together. What should have been awkward was instead thrilling. He'd never known how a tongue could go liquid until now.

The lord tasted faintly of the bread he'd eaten and then a hint of mint, which had Finn chasing that elusive freshness. Finn had a momentary worry that he wouldn't taste nice at all after his meal, but Rohan's tongue dove into his mouth, fluttering everywhere, searching for *more* of Finn's taste, as if it were addictive.

Rohan's hands slid down his face and throat, leaving trails of pleasure in his fingers' wake, to finally rest upon his shoulders. The lord's hands were callused likely from hunting and swordplay. His stepfather and stepbrothers' hands were completely smooth as they did no hard labor at all. Finn found he liked that roughness. The calluses tickled him.

Finn's arms wound around Rohan's neck. His fingers feathered through the back of the lord's hair. The blond locks felt smooth and fine under his fingertips. The leather armor creaked as Rohan pulled Finn closer to him. The barrier that was to save Rohan from swords and arrows was now keeping their skin from touching. Finn longed to feel Rohan's bare chest pressed against his own and the thump of the lord's heart vibrating under his hands.

"The armor," Rohan laughed between kisses. "My goddamned armor is getting in the way. Hold on… let me… it's easier to get off than on. And thank the gods it's not my plate!"

Finn's mind flashed on the brilliant shining silver plate that the lords of Rirea wore in battle. Such a set of armor would cost almost as much as a herd of horses the quality of Sweetfire. So Rohan's estate must have been a wealthy one indeed, at least at some time.

Before the Wall. Before the Fae. He could have married who he wanted but for those things. Maybe I would have still been heir-apparent to Tanglewood. Perhaps we could have met at a ball where, instead of servant and lord, we would have been equals and we could have danced… Finn thought with a stab of melancholy and then shook himself firmly. *Don't think about what might have been. Think of only the moment.*

Rohan was struggling with the buckles on the sides of his armor, which held the two sides together. Finn reached over, and with nimble fingers, unhooked them all. With a sigh of relief, the armor fell off. Rohan practically kicked it to the side. Finn carefully moved it for him. Rohan's boots were next.

He looked up rather helplessly at Finn. "Would you help again?" he asked.

"Of course. This is for my benefit after all," Finn found himself saying and couldn't quite believe

those words had left his mouth. But then, after all, could he believe he was undressing Rohan, about to touch and be touched, to kiss and be kissed, to orgasm with another person? No, he could not believe that either. So why not be bold?

This is who I would have been but for the bad times, he found himself thinking in a voice that was and wasn't his own. *This is who you are.*

Finn blinked.

Rohan's eyes widened at his teasing banter, no idea of the strange conversation that Finn was having inside of himself, but then he was laughing. "Indeed! I do this all for you, Finn. I get nothing out of it whatsoever!"

Finn laughed himself then. "No, you will not. For you are all for me. A dream on this rainy day.

"A dream," Rohan agreed, but looked discomfited by this fact.

Finn pulled off both of Rohan's boots. The rich scent of fine leather rose up out of them. There was none of the stink that usually filled Miles' shoes or the bitterness of Christopher's. Despite clearly having worked up a sweat killing wolves, Rohan bathed regularly. Something that Finn did, too, regardless of his stepfamily's desires to have him working every waking moment. He set the boots neatly to the side by the armor.

Rohan was unfastening his pants. Without thought, Finn reached for the waistband to slide them off. The lord's blue eyes sparkled with mirth and delight just as Finn froze, having seen Rohan's erect cock peeking through the lacings.

"This is for *you*, Finn," Rohan rumbled.

"Yes," Finn breathed and his own cock jerked in its thin cloth prison.

Rohan shimmied out of his leather-padded pants with Finn's help. Finn naturally folded them as much as they could be folded and set them to the side. It was only when he heard Rohan's chuckle that he realized he hadn't even *glanced* at the now fully naked lord, he was so intent on keeping things tidy. But also, he was savoring the moment he would turn and look upon Rohan naked.

Finn had seen other men naked before. He'd seen his stepbrothers many times when he'd helped them dress. He and Jacob had often bathed together in the pond. But he had never seen someone he was sexually interested in. So he ignored the lord's teasing laugh and took his time before slowly turning to see Rohan sprawled out on the blanket.

Rohan's long muscular legs were spread slightly apart. Finn followed up their lengths to the V in between them. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as he saw the dark-blond thatch of hair, the furry balls and then the long, erect length of cock.

Rohan's was a dark pink color. It was a good length of his hand and an inch and a half thick. The head was a rosy color and slick with pearlescent precum. Finn desperately swallowed and a gush of saliva filled his mouth at the sight of that organ. He couldn't help but compare it to his own, which was slightly longer, but leaner and a deeper red-plum color when he was aroused. The hair around his cock was also different. Less wiry and more gold than that on his head.

"You like what you see, I hope?" Rohan asked, and it was that "I hope" that turned what could have sounded arrogant into almost a plea.

So Finn had no hesitation saying, "Yes. You are beautiful."

Finn had dragged his eyes away from that slightly swaying cock to the rest of Rohan's body. He had pronounced muscles and a taut waist. There was a light covering of golden hair over the center of his chest and his nipples were pink. They were hard nubs from the cold air whistling in through the open doorway. The door had long ago rotted away and Finn had burned its remnants. Now he thought he should try and build another one.

But why? Finn asked himself. *This will only happen once. I'm a servant. He's a lord. We only have today.*

Rohan was staring at him out of hooded eyes then a happy smile alighted upon his lips. "I'm glad. Now… may I see you?"

The lord gracefully rolled up to his knees. He gently pushed back the fur cloak so that it fell behind Finn. Then he reached for the ratty shirt that covered Finn's too-thin frame. It wasn't until then that Finn truly realized he would have to get naked too. Finn's heart started to beat so fast that it threatened to pound right out of his chest. His mouth was also once again a desert.

Reading some of the apprehension in his face, Rohan asked with concern and not anger, "Do you not want to? We can stop."

Finn looked up at him with something like relief. He did not wish to stop. He had thought if he wished to that Rohan would, but this confirmation of his good nature eased something in Finn's throat and he was able to explain.

"I'm not as beautiful as you," Finn confessed.

Rohan grasped his chin gently. "You… you are a vision. Trust me. I will not see anything I do not like. So, may I undress you?"

Finn nodded after a long moment, words escaping him at that moment.

Rohan grasped the hem of his shirt and pulled it up over Finn's head. Finn's arms immediately crossed over his chest in protection. He'd bathed that morning, but he'd also done plenty of chores. Was he sweaty? Did he stink? Would Rohan notice that his ribs poked through his skin, that he was mostly muscle tied tightly to the bone?

When Rohan didn't say anything and didn't move to touch him, all of Finn's fears burst into frantic life. Rohan was still holding his shirt. Finn frantically moved to snatch it back and hold it protectively over his naked torso.

"You want to stop," Finn babbled. "You don't like what you see! Let me just--"

"No, Finn," Rohan's tone was tender as he held the shirt out of reach. "That's not it at all. You are… beautiful."

"I'm thin. This winter was hard and--"

"They're not feeding you properly," Rohan said, his voice still soft and filled with… with *something* that Finn couldn't identify, but similar to the tone that Magna and Jacob often used.

"It's been hard on everyone," Finn insisted, still not looking at Rohan's face. He had no idea what expression he would find there, but he couldn't risk it being a bad one.

"No one should starve. All should have enough to eat," Rohan stated. "But you… you have been ill-used, I think."

Somehow hearing it from Rohan and not Magna or Jacob *hurt*. It made it more real the abuse his stepfamily put him through. It was true that he was often punished by having the little bit of food he was allotted taken away. It was true that the other servants would sneak him some of their meager portions. It was true that he was hungry every single hour of every single day.

Rohan ran a hand down Finn's sides over the accordion of his ribs and the concave belly. The touch felt good. It was gentle yet firm. Finn shivered with it.

"You are so beautiful, Finn. Both inside and out. Someone should be *caring* for you," Rohan murmured.

"You don't know me. I could be a bad person. I could be a…" *Fae*. But, of course, he left that last word unsaid.

"I am a good judge of character," Rohan said with a firm shake of his head. "You're *good*.

Without a doubt, I know it."

Finn was able to lift his gaze to meet Rohan's then. What he saw in Rohan's eyes had his breath drawing in sharply. Rohan looked *fierce*--not at Finn--but at the people who had not taken care of him. Finn felt treasured at that moment.

How sad is that though? Finn thought. *I don't even know his last name! Should his caring mean more than Magna's or Jacob's?*

Of course, it shouldn't and it didn't. Not exactly. It was just that Rohan was a stranger. He had no ulterior motives. He was seeing Finn as almost an objective observer without the veil of love or hate or indifference. And he clearly felt anger on Finn's behalf.

But what does that matter? He will not--cannot--do anything about it as I am another man's property. We will have this afternoon and then we will ride off in different directions, Finn thought. *Stay in the moment. Stop wanting something more than this moment.*

Finn reached up and cupped Rohan's cheek. The lord turned his head into that touch. His lips kissed Finn's palm and his hot exhale flowed over Finn's fingers. It was erotic and intimate in ways that Finn wouldn't exactly be able to articulate later. But it also gave him courage. That and the fact that Rohan's cock was still very much erect, very much wanting him, whatever he saw. So Finn toed off his shoes and shimmied out of his pants. He was now completely nude. Rohan had already seen the worst of him. He thought his legs were long and shapely. His cock was pretty.

"Beautiful boy," Rohan murmured.

Rohan was then gently easing Finn onto his back on the cloak. His bigger, heavier body was on top of Finn's as they went prone on the floor, but he was careful not to crush Finn under his weight. Finn's legs opened automatically and he wrapped them around Rohan's taut waist as if his legs were meant to be there.

Rohan's hands feathered through Finn's hair and he leaned in to leisurely kiss Finn. He taught Finn how to kiss. Tongues and teeth and lips. The kisses were teasing then deeper and heat bloomed hotter between his legs and pressed up against Rohan's stomach while Rohan's cock pulsed against his. Finn pushed up against Rohan, wanting more contact between them.

Rohan rocked their bodies together and the heat in Finn's groin *flared* from candle flame to roaring bonfire. He moaned into their continuing kiss. Finn tried to bite down on the sound, embarrassed by such a sign of his neediness.

"Finn, do not deny me the sweet sound of your desire," Rohan murmured against his lips.

"I--I do not know what is right to do! I have never done this before," Finn confessed.

Rohan froze in his rocking. Finn immediately regretted his words. Was that the wrong thing to say? Perhaps his inexperience was unattractive to the clearly worldly lord. But then Rohan was caressing Finn's face with the back of one hand. His blue eyes had softened even more.

"You could do nothing wrong," Rohan assured him. "You honor me by letting me touch you like this. The first person to have done so."

Finn knew he was blushing as he reached for Rohan's face and ran his fingers along the hard, masculine plains, feeling the rough rasp of whiskers. "I am glad it is you."

Again, he had no doubts that this would be a one-time thing. That Rohan would ride away from him and that they would never see each other again. Or, if they did, it would be in passing at the market where Rohan would have the lord or lady of his estate on his arm while Finn would be scurrying about to get provisions for the manor. Neither would acknowledge the other. Finn tried not to be jealous or sad about this. He was not so naive regarding how the world worked. The powerful mated with the powerful. They might take a poor lover for a fling, but not forever.

But I will have this, Finn thought. *I will have memories of this moment with him.*

He slid his arms once more around Rohan's neck and brought the lord back down for more of those deep, passionate kisses that caused heat to bloom and spread between his thighs. The hard press of Rohan's chest against his own was divine, and, as he suspected, he could feel Rohan's heart.

"We will do nothing more than what you want, Finn," Rohan breathed between the kisses. "I won't--won't take your virginity, but I will have you cum with me. If you wish that."

"Yes," Finn managed to get out.

He wanted to lose his virginity to this man. Who better to give it to? But it was too much. Much too much. His body was behaving in ways that he couldn't understand or control. It felt like electricity was flowing in his veins. The storm started to pick up all around them. More lightning and thunder crackled through the air. Their bodies were painted in silver from the lightning and gold from the fire. Finn moaned constantly and thrashed his head from side to side. He felt like he might explode. Every nerve ending was alive!

The lord's head moved so that he could see all of Finn spread out on the crimson silk and wolf-fur cloak and then he would focus on Finn's cock. Finn was fully aroused. His cock was long and flushed pink. It curved up to his belly. The head was already slick with precum. Finn shifted his hips in embarrassment and pleasure. There was no disgust in Rohan's gaze, only desire. He felt… safe. No one had ever looked at him this way and he found he enjoyed Rohan's gaze upon him.

"Lovely," Rohan breathed.

"So are you," Finn murmured.

His gaze had dropped down to Rohan's cock once more. The lord straightened up so that he was up on his knees and Finn looked upon him again. Rohan's cock was most definitely thicker than Finn's. Finn tentatively reached towards it. His eyes met Rohan's for permission. Rohan took Finn's hand and led it to his cock. He didn't force Finn in any way, just gave him confidence that it was all right to touch. Finn curled his fingers around the turgid, velvety organ. It felt both the same and different than his own. Rohan let out a moan and his eyelids slid to half-mast.

Finn moved his hand up and down the shaft as he had done countless times to his own cock. Rohan's eyelids fell all the way shut. The lord leaned his head back, his lips parted, and his breathing quickened as Finn stroked him, becoming firmer and stronger in his caresses, as he saw the pleasurable reactions he wrung from Rohan. The lord grunted and his hips jerked as if he wanted to thrust inside of a willing body.

With his other hand, Finn reached for Rohan's balls and rolled them. They were heavy and hot and intriguing. Rohan let out a gasp and his head tipped back. A sheen of sweat appeared on the lord's handsome face as Finn dragged his thumb over the head of Rohan's cock and spread the slit. More gleaming precum oozed out of Rohan's penis. Finn slicked his hand with it so that his palm smoothly ran up and down the lord's length as he had often done to himself.

Rohan's hips began to jerk and thrust again in a rather desperate fashion. Finn smiled, feeling ridiculously powerful, even though he was so new at doing this to another person. His own cock was hard as a rock even though he had not been touched yet. He could reach his zenith and tip over the peak just by pleasuring Rohan. But the lord was not content with that.

Rohan's eyes opened and he looked almost wild. The blue irises were almost completely consumed by the black pupils. He reached down and grasped Finn's cock in one of his powerful hands. Finn's hips arched involuntarily. Electricity shot through his body at being touched there. Another first.

Rohan dragged his thumb up along the vein on the back of Finn's cock. That thumb swirled over

his sensitive head. Finn's hips rocketed upwards, but Rohan put a controlling hand on his right hip and kept him in place. He whined but he was glad for the control. It had never felt so good when he had touched himself!

Rohan then brought both their cocks within his grasp. The touch of Rohan's cock against his own had Finn whining and raking his fingers down Rohan's forearms. He left red marks in his fingers' wake, but the wild reaction seemed to please the lord.

Rohan's voice was a raspy burr as he said, "Together."

Finn's mind was too zapped by pleasure to understand. But Rohan's actions showed Finn what he meant as he began to stroke both their cocks together with both of his hands. They were fast and hard movements. Rohan's balls jiggled with the force of it. Finn's were already tight and hard and drawn up against his body. His cock felt like it was on fire! Only cumming would release the winding tension that was corkscrewing through him.

Rohan's movements became more frantic and his breathing was like a thin whine. Sweat broke out over Finn's face. His entire body was on fire now. The heat from his groin had traveled out to the tips of his fingers and the top of his skull. His cock and Rohan's felt like one. Rohan leaned down and fused their mouths together in a kiss that stole his breath. He saw stars because it lasted so long. And just as it ended, just as they broke apart for a breath of air, Finn's orgasm came. Both of them came. The storm crescendoed around them. Lightning struck the ground in no less than three places nearby. The cabin shook with it. But neither of them cared.

Rohan went rigid on top of him, his lips once more on Finn's as if giving him the breath of life. Finn arched up. Their cocks were pressed between their bodies. Their orgasms released at the same time. Lightning once more cracked across the sky and thunder shook the cabin, but they only felt and heard each other. Yet later Finn would realize he had *felt* the storm building with their desire for one another and he wondered if that was his magic too.

Finn's hands moved around to Rohan's strong back and he dug his fingernails into the firm flesh, keeping Rohan against him as his orgasm sent pulse after pulse of semen out of them both. Finally, they collapsed back onto the cloak, spent and breathing hard.

Finn could feel Rohan's heart thumping against his chest. His own heart mirrored that same beat. Rohan rolled over to the side and Finn had a momentary qualm that he would leave Finn, but Rohan did not. Instead, he then pulled Finn on top of him, cradling Finn against his body, kissing Finn slowly and softly. A smile bloomed on Finn's face and his eyelids started to fall shut. He fought against the pull of sleep.

"Rest, Finn. Sleep," Rohan urged in a voice heavy with sleep and spent desire. "I have you. I will keep you safe."

Finn snuggled against the bigger man and let his eyelids close. He listened to Rohan's heartbeat and the lashing of the rain until he fell into blissful darkness where only good dreams awaited him.

SEE YOU AGAIN

Rohan woke to a feeling of bliss. He could see the sun behind his eyelids. He heard birdsong. Any minute, his breakfast would be brought in and the day would begin. All the responsibilities and uncertainties would weigh down on him. Usually, that would either force him to wakefulness or have him burrowing under the covers. But, strangely, at that moment, Rohan did not feel either urge and he was smiling and felt light and didn't know why.

Then someone moved against him.

Finn.

The smile increased. He opened his eyelids. The cabin was awash in golden light that was falling through the open doorway, directly on top of their entwined bodies. The rain had stopped and, shockingly, the Lupine Woods looked beautiful. Refreshed. Water dripped down off of the leaves. The sunlight caused the droplets to glitter.

A taste of what was, Rohan thought. *Perhaps what could be.*

And there was this sense--however unfounded--that it was due to Finn. Rohan looked down to see the top of Finn's head pillowed on his chest. The young man was still asleep. His dark eyelashes fanned over his olive skin. Finn's lips were pursed as if he were perplexed by something. Rohan wondered if he was dreaming. He always had dreams just before he woke, but Finn seemed deeply asleep.

He's exhausted. Whatever family he serves works him very hard, I think.

The servants at the castle were treated with respect and were given fair wages, food, drink, clothing and a warm place to lay their heads every night. When they were too old or sick to work, they were sent to estates to live out their days in peace and comfort. Rohan doubted that Finn got anything like that. For a moment, he considered telling Finn who he was and offering him a position at the castle. They were always in need of clever young people.

He is so proud. Would he even take it if I offered? Rohan grimaced. He thought likely Finn would not. Then he added guiltily, *If he did take me up on my offer everything would change between us. As soon as I bring him under my protection then this will never happen again. I will never hold him. Never kiss him. Never sleep by his side.*

Rohan was shocked and dismayed at these feelings, both selfish and not. Finn was to have been one of those lovers he took once and walked away from, never to see again. That's what he always did! But here he was thinking about the *next* time they would be together. Here he was thinking that *having* Finn again meant more than *helping* him. And that last thought brought shame.

Finn spoke of his fellow servants like family, Rohan thought. *Even if we got past his pride to accept my help, he would not wish to leave them.*

But to serve the king… wouldn't Finn choose that? But then Finn would be doing that serving out of duty and not desire. But by not offering Finn this opportunity was Rohan being unspeakably selfish?

It is all too soon to feel like this, Rohan reminded himself. *I should not feel this way at all!*

And yet he did.

Considering what he had seen in the woods that day, first the strange white wolf with the red eyes and then the two Fae investigating the Wall, his uncle's words about needing to marry rang in his ears. Being with Finn would not lead into that.

But such a marriage will not be for love. Rohan's lips writhed back from his teeth. *If the Fae are planning on attacking then Tearlach*--he shuddered at the king's name--*would be the best choice. I need to talk to Uncle Hugues about this. He must be worried sick about me. And Leonid is probably beside himself.*

The sun that had seemed so bright and warming not so long ago was starting to fade. The afternoon was well on its way to evening. Finn made a soft sound and cuddled closer against him. The young man's lips parted and a warm gust of breath skated across Rohan's throat. Again, a smile lifted his lips, but it died.

I must return to the castle or they will have the entire Guard out combing the woods, he thought with a sigh.

Even after the rain, the forest was still dangerous as the ground was wet with poison that could seep through one's boots and harm horse's hooves. Finn would likely know the fastest way out of the woods. They could ride to the edge together and then… then they would have to part. His heart clenched at the thought.

What is wrong with me? Rohan thought fiercely. *Finn is just another momentary diversion. Something to lighten the burden I carry. Is he not? And if I must marry Tearlach…*

That actually had him wanting Finn both closer to him and much farther away. The very thought of Tearlach caused the skin between his shoulder blades to draw tight. What a joy it would be to have Finn as a lover he could retreat to. But Tearlach did not seem the type to want to share. So Finn would be in danger from him if they continued their affair after he married the older king.

I am thinking so far ahead! He scolded himself. *Uncle Hugues may convince me that there is nothing going on with the Fae. Not yet. So there would have to be no marriage to Tearlach or anyone!*

He was also, of course, assuming that Finn would want to see *him* again. Unless he revealed who he was and forced obeisance upon the young man--which he would never do--Finn could simply walk away from this encounter and treat it as a simple pleasant afternoon as he had been planning to. Now he was needier than he'd ever been for a young man whose full name he did not even know.

Finn stirred again on top of him. But this time it wasn't to cuddle back into sleep. A stray ray of late afternoon sunshine had broken through the clouds and streamed through the doorway right upon Finn as if seeking him out. The young man let out a soft grunt and stretched. Rohan felt the moment when sleep fully left him and confusion reigned as he realized he was laying upon another person.

"Good morning… or I should say good afternoon," Rohan said, his voice a deep, husky rumble.

Finn's head jerked up and green eyes focused on his face. Wonder came after alarm.

"So I didn't dream it. I didn't dream *you*," Finn murmured.

"No, I am very real. You, however, I am still not sure about," Rohan said, repeating, in a way, their conversation when they first met.

Rohan feathered the fingers of his right hand through Finn's mahogany-colored hair. The bronze

and gold highlights were far more apparent in the sun. Sunlight also made those green eyes sparkle. The pallor of Finn's skin was almost luminous.

"What?" Finn asked, ducking his head and looking up at Rohan through dark lashes. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You are more beautiful now than before," Rohan answered. He was not trying to flatter Finn or even seduce him again. He held up his free hand to stop the flow of words that he saw filling up Finn's plush mouth. "Before you object, I am just stating a fact as I see it. It is not an opinion."

The sunlight showed just how lovely Finn was when he blushed.

"You say I am beautiful, but you are so much more so," Finn said as he reached up and stroked down Rohan's right cheek.

Rohan turned his head to nuzzle Finn's elegant hand. He closed his eyes as Finn's fingers curled around his jaw. He was not sure how long they stayed this way. He could have remained in this stillness and silence, but for the twin beating of their hearts and the soft inhale and exhale of their breathing, forever.

I've never been struck dumb like this by someone, Rohan thought.

But forever did not last very long as Finn said, with evident reluctance, "Though the sun is bright now, this is truly its last gasp before twilight comes and we mustn't be in the woods when night descends."

Finn was right. In the darkness, there were more than wolves to fear in the Lupine Woods. And he had to get back to being king. Rohan opened his eyes and smiled once more at Finn. His heart, though, ached.

The two of them said nothing more as they got up. They helped each other clean up and put their clothes back on. Finn lovingly rolled up the cloak. Rohan caught sight of him pressing his nose into the fur and simply breathing in the scent of their lovemaking. He wished he had something of Finn's to take back with him. But the young man had nothing to offer. Finn made sure that the fire was extinguished before, finally done, they both looked back at the room that had been their savior in the storm.

"I have never regretted leaving a place more," Rohan said.

Finn merely nodded after a moment. The two of them then turned and went outside. He realized it was even later than he'd thought. Though golden sunlight gilded the tops of the trees, little was making it through the canopy to the forest floor any longer. Already, there were deep pools of darkness between the gnarled limbs. The two of them hurried to the horses.

"Ha! It looks like Tempest and Sweetfire have become friends, too!" Rohan laughed as he caught sight of the two horses pressing their heads together. Both animals made whinnies of welcome at seeing their riders.

"Sweetfire normally isn't eager to make friends, but you're right," Finn said, but there was a sadness to his tone and Rohan guessed what it was.

"They will miss one another greatly, I think," Rohan stated, hands on hips, his eyes sliding from the horses to Finn.

Finn's head lowered like a bloom too heavy for its stem. "Yes, they will."

"It would be wrong, then, to keep them apart for too long," Rohan said.

His heart was in his throat as he said those words. He tried to make them sound light and teasing. As if he were not asking to see Finn again.

The young man's head shot up and Finn's mouth fell open as he looked at Rohan. "You want to meet… I mean you want Tempest to see Sweetfire again?"

Rohan turned so he was facing Finn. He put his hands on the young man's shoulders. "Yes, but more importantly, I…" He licked his lips. "I want to see *you* again."

His voice sounded hoarse, weak, worried, yearning. Finn blinked and the fear that he would be rejected flowed through Rohan. It was something he had never really experienced.

"You want to see me again?" Finn repeated.

Rohan nodded. He felt like a marionette; it was so jerky and unnatural. "More than anything really."

Finn's eyes widened, but then a smile bloomed on his lips. "I do too. So much. I just didn't think…"

"I know that we both came into this believing it would be a one-time encounter, but… but I do not wish it to be," Rohan confessed.

His hands were sweaty and his heart's rhythm was all wrong. He knew that he was showing something of himself to Finn that he hadn't to others.

"But how will this work?" Finn asked. "You are a lord and I am a servant. My time is not my own."

"Surely, you have some moments to yourself? Sometime when you can slip away here? We could make this our spot," Rohan babbled, even though he, as king, would have little time to himself either.

Finn considered this, his green eyes going distant, but finally, the young man nodded and focused once more on Rohan. "Yes, yes, I will *make* time."

Rohan caressed Finn's face once more before he kissed the young man's lips. The kiss lingered, but the growing chill in the air caused them to pull back.

"Can you lead us out of the forest by the quickest route?" Rohan asked.

"Yes, we need to hurry."

The two of them hustled over to their horses. They practically leaped into the saddles. Rohan was impressed at the young man's horsemanship. Finn was better in the saddle than most nobles he'd seen. Sweetfire appeared completely taken with Finn and listened to his every command, seemingly anticipating others.

"If only you were so tractable, Tempest," Rohan murmured as he patted the great warhorse's neck.

Finn somehow found a trail in the ever-growing gloom and led them into the woods, away from the cabin. He would forever love that cabin. He cast one glance back at it before turning back to follow Finn. Darkness had fallen nearly completely by the time they reached the edge of the woods.

"Your night vision puts mine to shame, Finn. I could barely see you, let alone the trail," Rohan chuckled, but he was glad they were out of the woods. They were on the edge of some fields. He drew in a deep breath and the scent of green, growing things filled his nostrils. "By the gods, I haven't smelled spring like this in… I do not know how long."

Finn shifted uncomfortably on Sweetfire, though Rohan could not see why the young man suddenly seemed uncomfortable.

It is likely because it is time for us to part, Rohan realized. *This land though… it is so much more fertile than other farms. Or perhaps things are not so bad as my uncle said.*

"Finn, I would like to see you tomorrow at the cabin, perhaps around noon or just thereafter? If you cannot make it, that is all right. Try to leave word if you can. I will do the same," Rohan quickly got out. He wanted a time and date nailed down to see this beautiful young man.

Finn nodded. "I think I can do that."

"I wish I did not have to leave," Rohan said as silence fell between them again. "But we *will* see each other again."

Finn gave another nod. “I will look forward to nothing else.” The young man pointed in a westerly direction. “If you just ride straight west, you will reach the main road into the city. Can you find your way back to your estate from there? I would take you further myself, but I am already over my time--”

Rohan held up a hand. “Do not worry. I will find my way. Thank you, Finn. For everything.”

“No thanks are needed. I will see you tomorrow,” Finn said.

With more reluctance than he thought it was possible to feel, Rohan waved a final goodbye and headed to the west. He did not urge Tempest into a gallop, even though he knew he should hurry back. But every step they took was one step further away from Finn and that was an agony. Finally, he could see the road and so he turned around one more time. Finn was still there, sitting on Sweetfire, watching him go. He waved again. Finn’s good eyesight let him see it and the young man returned the wave. Rohan then rode hard away, knowing if he didn’t do it now, he might not ever leave.

PARTNERS

Finn eased the outside door to the kitchen closed as softly as he could. Full night had fallen and his stepfamily was being served dinner. Normally, he would be the one doing the serving, but it was his day off.

Pray let them agree that night and day are the same, Finn thought.

The kitchen was blissfully warm and scented with the smells of cooking. Roast pork, potatoes, bread and butter. Despite his large meal that afternoon--Rohan had been so kind and generous to leave him most of it--his stomach rumbled. Perhaps there would be some leftovers for the staff to share. His mind was on that happy thought when he heard a sound from behind him.

"Finn?" Christopher's voice rose up from behind him.

Finn spun around, his back hitting the door, and with his heart in his throat. "Christopher! What--what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be eating dinner?"

"Shouldn't you be serving it?" Christopher asked with a predatory air, scenting Finn was hiding something.

His eldest stepbrother was leaning against the threshold in his dark blue doublet and black leggings with the thigh-high boots. He crossed his legs at the ankles feigning nonchalance. Even though these were fine clothes, Finn was reminded immediately of Rohan's cloak, which he had rolled underneath the thin blanket tucked under his right arm. Though it was nowhere as flashy as what Christopher wore, it was clearly of better quality. Now that he had seen truly good craftsmanship--and touched it--he would know it anywhere.

Damnit, if Christopher sees the cloak there will be questions that I cannot answer! He went cold. *Christopher might even take it away. He might take this one precious souvenir of Rohan away from me. No… I won't allow that.*

Something woke in Finn then. Maybe it had been stirring with his magic that morning. Maybe it had been being treated so kindly by Rohan and imagining what life could be. Or maybe he'd just reached a tipping point. For within him, he felt his magic begin to simmer. Not as a force for healing and life-giving though. No, it was like something riding in on a storm. He swallowed and tightened his hold around the cloak and the wicker basket.

"No, it's my day off, remember?" Finn finally stated as he strode confidently into the kitchen, past the fireplace where the spit was still greasy with pork fat from that night's meal. Thinking of that rich, juicy pig being picked at by Miles, delicately cut by Christopher, and devoured by his stepfather angered him, too. Because he and the staff would have nothing. Nothing so warming and filling and good.

"And you certainly took advantage by coming in so late," Christopher snorted.

"Or you could say you took advantage of *me* by not giving me my day off. I was caught in the rain in the woods getting *your* herbs," Finn found himself snapping.

He could feel Christopher's shock at his tone and words. Finn knew he should be more careful now than ever. If he was punished, he would not get to see Rohan the next day. Maybe not ever. With that in mind, he forced his expression into one of blandness as he placed the wicker basket on the butcher block table in the center of the kitchen then tucked the cloak under the arm farthest from his stepbrother. He tried to shield it from view with his body. Hopefully, Christopher would be uninterested in anything he had. After all, wasn't his portion always rags? He dug his fingernails into his palm.

Calm. Calm. I must be calm.

"So what are you doing here, Christopher?" Finn asked then added as kindly as he could, "Do you need something at the table?"

"I was waiting for you. What other reason would bring me into the kitchen?" Christopher snorted as if it was absurd that he'd serve himself anything from here.

But Finn found himself looking at Christopher's hands to make sure that there weren't any vials or potions in them, because there was one very good reason--or *bad* reason--that Christopher could be there. And that was to poison someone.

Do I really believe that? Finn wondered. *That he killed old Jonathan? By the gods, I think I do. He's killed innocent animals aplenty. Servants hardly rise above that level in his eyes.*

"Why do you want me?" Finn asked.

He placed the cloak wrapped in the thin blanket on the chair beside the side table where Magna sat when she was peeling potatoes. He wondered where she was. Likely serving the dinner. He wished she was here. Christopher would be deterred by another's presence from whatever he was up to.

"You were supposed to get my herbs," Christopher said tartly. "Or has one whole day off--"

"Half day, not even," Finn found himself correcting his stepbrother.

"Goodness, aren't you bold today? Fine, has your *half*-day off gone to your head?" Christopher's gray eyes narrowed with suspicion.

Christopher was right. Despite his cautions to himself about keeping his temper and being civil, he was failing.

"I have your things right here. I was going to bring them to you right away, but, as you saw, I just got back."

Finn blocked Christopher's view of the cloak as he thrust out the sack with the herbs Christopher had wanted. He'd fed Sweetfire the rest of the berries when he'd put his beloved mare in the stables for the night. Sweetfire had seemed grateful, for once, going into her stall. Finn thought it wasn't just tiredness that had the mare down, but the loss of her companion, Tempest.

Christopher slowly sauntered over to him and took the sack with only two fingers of his right hand as if it were unclean. The only unclean things in it were the herbs.

"Everything's there?" Christopher asked.

"Yes." Finn shifted as Christopher attempted to look behind him. He hoped that it was subtle, but the look of triumph in Christopher's eyes told him it was not.

"What are you hiding there?" Christopher demanded to know.

Finn gritted his teeth. "Nothing."

"It's clearly *not* nothing since you don't want me to see it. Sneaking in the back door late at night, hiding things… what are you up to?" Christopher asked. His eyes narrowed.

"Nothing," Finn repeated louder as if somehow that would convey that what his stepbrother was seeing wasn't there when it clearly was.

I would rather die than give up the cloak. It's mine. Rohan gave it to me. It is all I may ever have of him… unless we see each other tomorrow, Finn thought desperately. *Rohan could change his mind. Regret the offer to a servant boy.*

"Really? Let me see this *nothing*." Christopher's eyes were slits.

"Take your herbs and *go*."

"I don't think I will."

His stepbrother tossed the sack on the counter and darted towards the chair, attempting to knock Finn aside to get to the cloak.

"What are you doing?!" Finn cried. "Stop! Get back!"

But Christopher did not get back. Instead he shoved Finn *hard*. Finn's hip was slammed painfully into the table. Rage and fear caused Finn to thrust out a hand to block him. The blow was more powerful than it should have been. Magic had crackled up Finn's arm and exploded through his palm.

Christopher rocketed back several feet. His arms pinwheeled. He would have fallen on his ass, but he miraculously grasped onto the fireplace's mantle at the last moment and kept his feet. Finn's hand flickered with lightning. With *magic*. Both of them were utterly silent for long moments, staring at Finn's glowing hand.

"Well, that *nothing* must be something good if you're willing to use magic on me," Christopher said finally and wiped his mouth. There was blood leaking from the corner. He must have bit his lip or tongue. Or maybe Finn had struck him so hard as to break something inside of him.

No, if I had he would be showing more pain, Finn thought almost clinically. The thought was his own and yet had not sounded like himself. It had sounded older, wiser, more jaded. And stronger. So much stronger.

"You need to just leave it, Christopher," Finn said through clenched teeth.

"I will." Christopher held up his hands as if in surrender. "I'm actually thrilled at this show of life from you. Downtrodden Finn. Pathetic doormat Finn. Little lost Fae boy--"

"Shut up, Christopher." Finn's hand crackled.

Christopher actually looked intrigued and not afraid. "They say the Fae are fierce warriors without equal. I'm glad that there's some of that in you."

"Why?"

"Because I need something from you. And it requires fortitude. I need to ensure that you won't fold under pressure," Christopher said. "And also someone I can trust."

"You think you can *trust* me?" Finn stared hard at his stepbrother. There was anything but trust between them.

Christopher smiled broadly. "Of course, because you have so much to lose if you betray me."

Finn said nothing. He wanted--and dreaded--to see where Christopher was going with this.

"I will forget all of this. You coming in late. Whatever you're hiding. Using magic against me like a very bad Fae," Christopher chuckled even as Finn frowned. "In fact, I will forget about whatever you want me to from now on."

Finn couldn't hide his disbelief as he asked, "Why would you do that?"

Christopher tented his fingers together beneath his chin. "Because I want you to help me with my experiments--"

"I'm not going to help you kill animals or…"

Christopher lifted an eyebrow. "Or?"

Finn narrowed his eyes and said, "Or *people*. I won't help you do that, Christopher. I don't have any secrets worth that."

"Killing people is *easy*," Christopher said with a wave of one hand, and a chill ran through Finn. Maybe it wasn't just old Jonathan that Christopher had eliminated with his alchemy. "What I said to Father this morning is the truth. I want to see if I can't create a potion to restore the land."

Finn crossed his arms over his chest. "You can't."

"Why not? Because you would be obsolete to us if I could? Don't want anyone else--anything else--to take your place?" Christopher sidled away from him as he said this.

"No, Christopher. It would be a good thing if you could create a potion that could restore the land. I would be glad of it," Finn told him honestly. "We could help other people with it. This year I could hardly restore Tanglewood."

Christopher gave a narrow-eyed glance. "And yet most are saying that the estate is blooming more this year than ever before."

Finn showed nothing even as his heart trembled within him. He was thinking of the Fae. Not only had they *noticed* he'd taken some of the life, they'd noticed *right away*, and come directly to the spot.

And it might lead to war...

"You truly must have drained quite a bit of the surrounding estates," Christopher finally said as he remained silent.

"Tanglewood's abundance will need to be explained," Finn said. "Maybe sooner than we think. So a potion that could restore life? Well, it would make sense of all that."

Finn thought of how Rohan had noticed the difference about the estate, even in the dark, just from the smell. It was indeed becoming way too obvious that something unnatural was happening at Tanglewood. If they could point to Christopher's alchemical experiments as the cause then the true cause--his magic--would never be known.

Christopher stroked his chin and stated the same idea, "Your secret would be safe."

"It would be," Finn agreed.

"You really don't seem afraid of us turning you in, though, after we don't need you anymore," Christopher said, narrowing his eyes once again. "You do realize there's still a sizable bounty on Fae heads. And my brother and father, dear as they are to me, would sell just about anything for that kind of money."

Finn realized he *wasn't* as afraid of that as before. Jacob's logical argument for why not seemed keener to him now than before.

Wetting his lips, Finn stated as confidently as he could, "You'd be strung up just like me. Harboring a Fae for almost two decades? King Rohan would never believe you weren't involved in some plot against the kingdom or that you're simply too--too terminally stupid to live!"

"Too terminally stupid to live?" Christopher's eyes danced with amusement as he repeated the phrase. "You really are on *fire* tonight! Though I wouldn't speak so freely in front of Miles or Father. They'd flay your back open."

Christopher was right. Normally, he'd have been terrified to see what Christopher would do now. But, oddly, he believed Christopher wouldn't do anything. So long as Finn helped him...

"Too terminally stupid to live! I love it! I'm going to use that!" Christopher chuckled as he repeated the phrase again. "And you're right. I, personally, wondered why *you* didn't figure that out earlier. I actually thought *you* were too terminally stupid to live."

"Maybe I was," Finn murmured as his world seemed to tilt on its axis.

Is Jacob right that I should leave Tanglewood, then, too? If they won't turn me in no matter what, should I just go?

But the thought of leaving Tanglewood, of leaving all that was left of his mother and those who were his friends, twisted something inside of him. It was like barbed wire that cut his heart. Yet then he thought of Rohan. If only he could make Rohan's estate bloom so that the lord did not have to marry where there was no love. But that was madness. Rohan would discover that Finn was a Fae and the way he'd spoken about them with such cold anger… Finn needed to quash any fantasy he had that Rohan would accept who and what he was in that way.

"Look, Finn, help me create a potion that works. We can sell it. The two of us. Make a fortune and not worry about having to marry in my case or… *serve* in yours," Christopher said. "We could be business partners. I'm not like my father."

"What do you mean that you're not like Gerard?" Finn asked about the last.

"He thinks *small*. He wants *respectability*. But who cares about that? Money leads to power and power is *everything*," Christopher said. "So, I won't inquire about your secrets. I'll keep them. So long as we're partners."

Finn did not believe for one moment that Christopher wanted him as a partner. What he wanted was someone who could help him get what he wanted. And, if it was even possible to create such a potion, as soon as it was done, he would toss Finn to the side. Or something worse.

But it is a good bargain for now, a voice inside of him said. Again, it sounded like him, but not. *Play him at his own game.*

"What do you have to say, Finn? Partners?" Christopher extended a thin, bloodless hand.

Lie, the voice whispered. *Make him believe what you want him to believe.*

To what end? Finn found himself asking.

But there was no answer from the voice.

Who are you? Finn asked.

It was madness to expect an answer to that question. And there wasn't one. Just the echo of the word: *Lie.*

"Am I going to stick my hand out forever?" Christopher asked, growing impatient.

Finn took his stepbrother's cold hand and lied, "Partners."

THE KING RETURNS

Rohan and Tempest were like a blur as they raced over the country lanes and then into the city of Dawnmore. He startled pedestrians and merchants alike as they stormed through the city as if they were on fire. There were none who recognized him and so a few fists were raised and harsh words shouted after his fleet form. But he could not stop to apologize. Now that he was no longer in Finn's company, he wanted nothing more than to assure his uncle and the Guard of his safety. He likely would have to go after them in the woods!

Soon Tempest was clopping over the Silver Bridge, which got its name from the color of the stones it was made out of, towards Reave Castle's portcullis. He immediately saw that there were dozens of Guard amassing in the courtyard. They were likely preparing some kind of search for him.

"... king is our highest priority! We take torches to light our way! Do everything we can to find him!" It was Captain Leonid Blanchet, Captain of the Guard. His voice was filled with strain as he rode back and forth on his horse before the dozens of other soldiers.

Everyone's face showed grim expressions. Rohan fully expected his uncle to have been shouting himself hoarse out here with Leonid, but he saw no sign of Hugues. Guilt though still pricked Rohan. His uncle was undoubtedly already out in Lupine Woods, braving dangers that none should. By his foolishness in storming the wolves alone, he had alarmed his Guard and put lives at risk. It had been reckless.

But I would not have met Finn if I had not been so foolish, he realized and he could not regret that. But he also wouldn't let anyone else pay for his good fortune's mistake.

"Leonid! Captain Blanchet!" Rohan called, raising his right hand from the reins and waving as he approached the portcullis.

The two guardsmen who had been guarding the portcullis recognized Tempest, more than him, and there were shouts of shock and joy.

"The king! The king has returned!" Multiple voices rose up.

Leonid turned in his saddle. His gray eyes were huge. He looked like he had aged a decade since Rohan had seen him that morning. The Guard captain swung off his horse as Rohan drew back on Tempest's reins. Leonid was on his knees, right arm crossed over his chest, head bowed before Rohan. All the other Guard followed suit.

"My king! My king… we t-thought… thought…" Leonid's voice was breaking.

More guilt stabbed Rohan. He had caused this pain. He would never regret meeting Finn, but he would not be taking such foolish chances again. When he did go to meet up with the young man he would take Leonid into his confidence so the Guard captain did not break himself upon the rocks worrying about his safety.

"I am well, Captain Blanchet," Rohan said gently. "Forgive me for worrying you. But when the rain came I had to take shelter and then I… fell asleep. I was exhausted after the battle with the wolves."

He winced telling this lie, but it was the best explanation he could give right now.

"Of course! You did what was right!" Leonid cried, not meaning to imply that Rohan had been a fool who had gotten separated from his hunting party, dragged into the forest by his ankle and nearly died.

Two stableboys came racing into the courtyard to help him get down from his horse. He easily swung his leg over and handed the reins to the blond boy with a mop of curls. He mussed those curls which had the boy giving him a gap toothed grin.

"Thank you, Thorin," Rohan said to the boy. He could not help but think of Finn then as he compared the neat, clean clothes Thorin had compared to the rags that clothed Finn's starved frame. He swallowed hard, but managed to find another smile for the stable boy. "Go ahead and give Tempest a good rubdown and many treats. We have had quite the adventure today."

"Yes, your majesty!" Thorin said with a smooth bow and then he and his companion took Tempest towards the stables.

Rohan looked back at Leonid. His Guard captain was still kneeling, but Leonid had looked up to check that he was truly unharmed. His head quickly lowered again.

"Everyone, rise!" Rohan lifted both of his hands into the air to indicate that they should get to their feet.

The looks of sheer relief at finding him alive and well shone in all their faces. Rohan smiled at them all, trying to assure them that he was completely healthy despite his adventures in the Lupine Woods. Leonid immediately came before him.

"I was going to bring the Guard out earlier, my king, but Lord De Clare said that it would not be safe," Leonid said. There was a momentary flicker of distaste on his face. "He was sure that you would have righted yourself and found shelter before the rain began."

"My uncle was right about both things." Rohan clapped Leonid on the shoulder. "I am so relieved that you didn't brave the woods during a storm. To have your lives on my conscience due to such a foolish act of my own… well, I could not bear it. Where is my uncle? What happened after I was dragged away?"

Despite his words to Leonid, there was a stirring of hurt and unease in his chest at his uncle's easy dismissal of his welfare. It wasn't that what his uncle had said wasn't true. And he was glad that the Guard was safe. But shouldn't his uncle be out here now? Waiting at the portcullis? Worrying about him?

He has always been a practical man, Rohan reminded himself. *He believes in me. He knew that I would return safely on my own.*

But despite trying to find solace in this, he could not. He tried to keep his expression smooth as he spoke to Leonid. Yet he thought that the Guard captain noted his displeasure. Or maybe Leonid felt the same thing. Something was wrong with his uncle's behavior. His mind went to the white wolf again and that ridiculous idea that it had *recognized* Hugues.

"Lord De Clare is in his rooms," Leonid explained as they both walked towards the main entrance of Reave Castle.

Already he saw Lord Serxio Lemos, the second son of Lady Tora, who had an estate in the farthest northern point of Rirea. Lady Tora had sent Serxio "to be of service in any way to the king". Serxio spent most of his time romancing any buxom young woman he could find, which was, undoubtedly,

not what Lady Tora had hoped he would spend his time doing. But Serxio and Rohan got on well and he was happy to turn a blind eye to any of the boy's indiscretions. He had plenty of his own so it would have been the height of hypocrisy to judge.

"My king!" Serxio immediately bowed low. "I am so glad that you have returned safely."

He was struck that even Serxio was here, instead of in the arms of some maiden, unlike his uncle who hadn't even bothered to show up! Had his uncle fallen asleep? Was he reading one of his worm-eaten tomes, so obsessed with trees with glass leaves, that he hadn't heard the commotion of his return? He was certain that dozens of servants had been sent throughout the castle to notify everyone of his return. But he saw no sign of Uncle Hugues hustling down to check on him.

"Thank you, Serxio. I am quite glad for your good thoughts," Rohan said kindly. "If you wouldn't mind, could you see to it that a bath is drawn for me? I will be there in a quarter of an hour. I just want to assure my uncle of my good health and then I desire to soak in a tub."

For a moment, he imagined Finn between his legs in that bath, leaning back against Rohan's front, them laughing as Rohan slipped his hands over Finn's slippery shoulders. Finn's mahogany hair would be slicked back with water. Droplets would glisten on Finn's cheeks and lips. Rohan would kiss those away and then follow more droplets that streamed down Finn's throat to his lovely chest and… he stopped himself. He had to be focused on this moment. When he was *in* the bath then he could fantasize about the young man.

Serxio sprang up like a marionette whose strings had been pulled tightly. "Of course, my king, I will see that it is done!"

He then bowed again while Leonid and Rohan walked past him into the great hall of the castle. The ceiling rose up two stories in height. The gray-silvery stone sparkled under the masses of lit torches. The rich reds and golds of the tapestries that covered the walls showed scenes of hunting and feasting adding a warmth to the space, which was chilly at the best of times.

There were two curving staircases that led to the second-floor balcony. Directly ahead of them, through another set of impressive carved doors, was the throne room. He always thought of that space as his *parents'* throne room, not his, even though he had spent more time as king than he'd had them in his life.

He dragged his gaze from the closed doors and headed towards the right curving staircase. His uncle's rooms were in the east wing. Leonid accompanied him, having trouble keeping pace. His anger at his uncle's absence was now turning to alarm. Hugues had always cared for him, like a second father! He couldn't believe that inattention would keep the man away! Perhaps he was ill. Or had slipped in the bath and hit his head! Something could have happened!

"Tell me what occurred after we were separated," Rohan demanded.

"After you were dragged away, the white wolf attacked us," Leonid told him with soft urgency.

"It did?" Rohan's eyebrows rose.

He had thought that it would go after him. He examined why he had assumed that. Because he was king and he had thought that the Fae had sent it. Or, just as likely, he was in the midst of its pack and was the one slaughtering its kin. But it had left him and gone after his uncle and half a dozen heavily armed soldiers. Interesting and unnerving.

"It was intent on getting to your uncle," Leonid informed him as they walked briskly over the crimson runner.

The hallway they were walking down had an arched ceiling. The stone walls--everything was made of stone or wood in Reave Castle--were covered with yet more tapestries and brilliant oil paintings from artists in residence over the years. His mother had been a huge patron of the arts and

sciences. She had brought painters, poets, writers, scientists, alchemists, sorcerers, wise women, anyone and everyone to court. The kingdom had bustled with their magic and wisdom and, in some cases, insanity. Rohan had not continued the practice. Not that he hadn't tried. The thing was that after the Wall went up no one would come. No one but a few of his uncle's cronies who slipped in and out of the castle without speaking to anyone but Hugues, that was.

"The white wolf went after Uncle Hugues? Why?" Rohan frowned.

Because it recognized him, his mind whispered. *From where? And, even if that were possible for a wolf to remember my uncle, why would it go after him?*

"I am not certain, my king, but it took all of us to keep that white wolf away from him. Your uncle used some of his concoctions to set the wolf's fur on fire. It yelped, I can tell you, then we rode off as fast as we could."

Leonid paused and bit his lip, looking guilty. Rohan guessed that they rode off in the *opposite* direction from the one he had been dragged in by Tempest.

"It's all right, Leonid. I'm glad you kept my uncle safe. It seems Tempest led me *away* from danger." Rohan clasped Leonid's shoulder again.

"We escaped the white wolf and then it began to rain and..." Leonid looked miserable.

"And you went back to the castle?" Rohan stated, assuming from what Leonid had said before.

"Yes," Leonid answered, but kept his eyes averted.

"What is it?" Rohan put a hand on Leonid's chest.

"I could be wrong! I could have misunderstood! We were all rattled and--"

"It's all right. I want to hear your thoughts," Rohan insisted.

"The wolf… your uncle *knew* the wolf. They *knew* each other. Your uncle was afraid of going back into the woods," Leonid said and then clamped his lips shut.

But what he didn't say Rohan still heard. Namely, that even if there had not been rain, his uncle would have abandoned him in the woods while he fled back to the castle. His hurt deepened, but his suspicion was also aroused.

Suspicion of what?

"Thank you, Leonid. I appreciate your candor. You can go rest now. I am fine on my own," Rohan told him and tried to make a smile appear on his lips. "I'm sure that Uncle Hugues will clarify this mystery of the white wolf for me."

Leonid hesitated, but then nodded, crossed his right arm over his chest, bowed and retreated. Rohan was left alone just ten feet from his uncle's rooms. What was his uncle hiding? For he was *definitely* hiding something. The white wolf with the red eyes stunk of Fae! Yet his uncle *knew* this wolf and this wolf *knew* his uncle. As absurd as that sounded, something deep within him knew it was true and he had learned to trust that sixth sense.

With a burst of temper, Rohan strode to the doors and attempted to push them open. But the doors were locked. He stared at them in disbelief. He couldn't remember when his uncle's doors had ever been barred. He knocked, gritting his teeth, and waited.

No answer.

He knocked louder.

No answer. No sound of footsteps. No calling out to question who was at the door. *Nothing*. Maybe his uncle really *was* ill. Panic mixed with anger filled him. He banged his hands on the doors.

"Uncle?! UNCLE?!" Rohan called out. He would break down the door if he needed to! He envisioned his uncle bleeding or unconscious or--

There was a soft answer from beyond the doors, "Rohan? Rohan, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me." He added internally, *You would know that if you had looked for me! Why does it sound like I'm an afterthought? Your nephew! Your king!* But that anger was mixed with relief. His uncle was not hurt. He had not lost his last remaining family. There was an explanation for all of this. He was sure that his uncle would give it and he would feel foolish. "Are you all right, Uncle?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," his uncle sounded distracted as if Rohan were disturbing him.

Rohan grimaced and said more firmly, "Let me in. I need to talk to you."

But the doors stayed closed. "I--I can't."

"What?" Rohan was stunned.

There was a *long* pause and then his uncle murmured, "I'm in the middle of an experiment. I can't let you in."

"Have you lost your mind?" Rohan found himself saying. "You abandoned me--"

"No, no, Rohan, I was the only one in danger. You must believe this. Please, please forgive me," his uncle told him. There was another long pause and then, "I promise an explanation in the morning."

Rohan stared at the closed doors. What was going on here? What was happening?

"Please trust me, Rohan. I'll explain everything later. But I must do this first," his uncle said.

The urge to unsheathe his sword and hack at the door actually occurred to Rohan. But he swallowed the bewilderment, hurt and anger at his uncle's behavior. He'd told Leonid that his uncle always had a good reason for what he did. He had to trust that. He had to believe that. If he didn't…

"Tomorrow, Uncle!" Rohan commanded. "You will tell me tomorrow."

With that, he spun on his heel and stalked to his own chambers where a bath awaited him. He would have his answers tomorrow from his Uncle Hugues. Hopefully, amidst the steam and heat of the bath, he would be able to forget--for the moment--his uncle's bizarre behavior and concentrate instead on Finn.

I hope Finn's homecoming has been better than mine!

"I don't suppose you'd like to start tonight on the potions?" Christopher asked with a disturbing eagerness.

"Not tonight," Finn's voice was firm. Exhaustion was pulling on him, making him want to sit down, or better yet, lay down. The sleep that afternoon had helped, but he still needed more. His cheeks heated as the memory of Rohan's heartbeat in his ears and the warmth of his chest underneath Finn's cheek came back to him. He cleared his throat and said, "I need to recover. Tomorrow, though, after my chores--"

"I'll find someone else to do those. I need your full attention to this matter," Christopher quickly interjected.

Finn wouldn't let the others do his chores. He would find a way to do both. But he needed to get away at noon to meet Rohan.

I won't give that up. Hopefully, he won't change his mind.

"So tomorrow… we'll start?" Christopher stated more than asked.

"Yes, we'll start," Finn said. "Tomorrow."

"Well, I suppose I'll leave you. This is… where you sleep after all." Christopher looked around at the kitchen then towards the curtain covered nook where Finn bedded down.

"Don't forget your herbs." Finn gestured to the bag.

"Of course. We'll need these tomorrow." Christopher took the bag and swaggered from the room.

The moment he was gone, Finn sagged on the chair with the cloak. All the fight had left him and now a cold terror had come over him and he shivered despite the nearness of the kitchen fire.

What is going on with me? I hardly feel like myself. And that is good… and bad. I can't push things like that. I have Rohan to lose now.

But taking risks seemed to be what he was all about now. Stealing life from the Fae. Seeing the Fae on the other side of the Wall. He had been a fool not to think that what he'd done wouldn't be noticed. But still, it might not be tracked back here to him. They would have to come through the Wall, follow the magic back to Tanglewood, and, finally, to him. A servant. But surely they wouldn't come through the Wall unless they were invading, and if they were invading they wouldn't bother with him. Not particularly anyway. They would just kill him with all the rest.

And now there was this "partnership" with Christopher. He couldn't imagine what it would entail. He had no idea if he could actually help Christopher put life in a bottle. Probably not. Besides Christopher would, undoubtedly, betray him.

It was all madness! He felt fur under his fingertips. It was the cloak. He closed his eyes. *Rohan*. Rohan was the best thing that he had ever had in his life. Except for his mother, of course. Finn

blindly touched his lips. He could remember Rohan's lips on his. Rohan's hands on his body. When they had cum together, and the lightning had split the sky, it had been so right.

I will survive anything to see him again, Finn thought.

Finn tried to temper his expectations. Rohan could come to his senses and realize that meeting with a servant in the woods was foolish at best. He could forget all about Finn. For while Rohan was everything to him, Finn could not be everything to a lord. His fingers tightened in the fur.

But I still hope, Finn thought. *Maybe I will dream of him tonight.*

Exhaustion weighed him down. But he shouldn't leave Magna and Emmott to do all the dishes and clean up from dinner. Yet they were still serving his stepfamily dinner. He would just lay his head down and close his eyes for a moment. Their return would wake him and he would aid them. So, guilt extinguished, Finn got up from the chair and went to the nook by the fire. The metal rings rattled as he pushed the curtain aside. He slipped off his shoes. The pants had dried, and miraculously, did not need the wash he'd feared from brushing against the tree so he kept those on. He then lovingly unrolled the cloak, laying it down on the stone shelf that was his bed.

He hoisted himself up on top of the soft material and then drew the cloak up around him. He pulled the curtain closed. The firelight and candlelight were a soft glow around the edges of the frayed material. He drew the cloak up over his head and complete darkness fell. He was surrounded by the spicy scent of the lord and the faint remnants of their lovemaking. Finn smiled and closed his eyes. It felt like only seconds before he was snapped into wakefulness.

Howls? Wolves! They must be right outside the kitchen door! They've never come this close before!

Finn's eyelids flew open and confusion filled him. He was not in his nook. He was in the woods! Again, in the woods! He was standing on top of a rise. Trees surrounded him as if he were in the middle of a vast ocean. A dark and deep ocean filled with predators.

How did I get here?

He jerked his head around, trying to figure out where he was. He could not see the lights of town, but he could see the Wall. It rose up like a green, emerald blade from the forest floor.

Did I sleepwalk?

After his mother's death, Magna had told him he'd walk in his sleep almost every night. He would head out towards the woods. He would be dressed in thin nightclothes, but would still manage to wander barefoot in the middle of winter without seemingly being impacted by the cold. Eventually, they'd tied a rope with a bell to his ankle and the other end to a heavy iron. That way they'd be alerted if he tried to leave.

"Where do you think I was going, Magna?" he'd asked her.

A sad looked appeared in her eyes. "To the Wall, Finn. To look for your father."

But Finn had never believed that. He thought instead that he was looking for his mother's spirit. She had loved the woods even as they had begun to twist. Surely, her spirit, if it had gone anywhere, would have drifted into the Lupine Woods where she had once walked amongst the trees without fear.

But Finn was afraid now of those woods. His feet were bare. The knife he usually carried wasn't at his waist. Not that it would have done him any good. The howls were all around him. The moon--bone white and huge--hung high above him and its beams illuminated him as if he were on stage.

The wolves will see me! I have to hide! I have to--

His thoughts froze as he saw a gigantic white wolf with glowing red eyes at the base of the rise. Finn's tongue stuck to the top of his mouth. He recognized this wolf, even though he had never seen such a creature before. He had only heard about it. Rohan had told him about it.

Why are you here? Are you chasing Rohan and that led you to me? Finn wondered at the wolf though he didn't speak them out loud.

Yet the white wolf lifted its massive head and looked curiously at him as if it heard what he had said. The howls stopped as the white wolf set foot fully into the moonlight. Finn's breath caught in his chest. He hugged the fur cloak tighter around him. Silk and fur would provide him no protection from that thing's claws and teeth.

Stay down there, he begged silently. *Stay away from me, white wolf.*

The white wolf looked at him again in that way that made it seem it had heard Finn. But it wasn't listening to his request, for step by step, it moved up the rise towards him on huge paws. Finn willed himself to move, too, to dash down the other side of the rise, to lose it between the trees, but he remained frozen in place like he'd grown roots. Not that it was easy to lose a wolf when it had gotten one's scent. Plus, he was downwind of the wolf. It lifted its head and scented the breeze. Its red eyes closed as if *relishing* the scent of him. Its long tongue lolled out of its mouth as if in pleasure.

Finn again willed his feet to move. To run. But they were still rooted to the ground. He was going to be frozen like this while the wolf took him down, ripped out his throat, and feasted upon his flesh and blood. The white wolf didn't look starving like its brethren. It was muscular and well-fed. Because it likely hunted without remorse.

Why am I here? Finn wondered helplessly *Why would I come here?*

No answers to those questions came. The white wolf was now on top of the rise. He could see its breath frosting the air. He could smell it. Its scent was of ice and snow. It was an oddly pure scent for something so brutal.

And it was beautiful too.

The white fur was absolutely flawless. It looked *soft* and he almost yearned to bury his face in its ruff like he did with the fur of the cloak. It stopped a few feet from him. His heart thumped like a drum, faster and faster. Those red eyes--like embers--met his and there was an intelligence in them that was not a mere animal's. Fear left Finn, slightly. It wasn't attacking. It seemed like it was trying to tell him something.

Finn found himself looking deeper into those red eyes. The white wolf approached another step yet his heart rate slowed. Finn sank down on his haunches. The white wolf was taller than him when he was at that level. It approached another step yet his heartbeat was now at a normal rhythm. They were within touching distance. If it wanted to kill him, it could. There was nothing he could do to stop it. But he was no longer afraid.

"What do you want? What do you want of me?" Finn asked.

The wolf cocked its massive head to the side. Its tongue lolled out again, but this time in a friendly manner. Finn found laughter bubbling up in him. Without thought, he reached and grasped the wolf's big cheeks in his hands. The wolf froze. He froze. Did it not like to be touched? No, it did like it. But there were few who dared to touch it, he realized almost as if he was hearing its thoughts. Fewer still that it *allowed* to touch it. But it would allow him to. Again, he wasn't sure if he was imagining this connection with the white wolf. Was he really catching some of its thoughts?

He ruffled the furry head, scratching it between the massive ears and under the furry chin, and along its solid flanks. He was able to move now. He hadn't even realized that he was free of the paralysis that had held him in place before. The wolf followed him with those red eyes and the lolling tongue as he stood up to regard it.

"You're beautiful," Finn told it. "So beautiful. Not scary at all."

The white wolf bared its teeth, but not as a warning, merely as a show that it *could* be scary. Finn

kissed its head. It left out a soft wheeze of pleasure. Finn pulled back, smiling. He looked around them. The forest did not seem as frightening as it had either. Now that he had this wolf at his side.

"What's your name? You must have a magnificent name. I am betting you are the king of wolves," Finn said.

The white wolf tilted its head and Finn swore he heard the name, *Tyreon.*

Finn smiled. "Well, Tyreon, I don't have any idea why I'm here or why you're here. But I'm… glad."

Tyreon looked at him meaningfully and then it gazed towards the Wall. Finn followed that look and drew in a deep breath. The Wall was *gone*. He could see Fae lands beyond it. Tyreon was suddenly pulling away from his touch.

"Hey! Where are you going? Don't leave me!" Finn cried.

The white wolf stopped a few paces away and made a soft bark. It turned its head towards the missing Wall again. Finn followed its gaze. The Fae side of the Wall was spread out before him. The difference between the human side and the Fae one was staggering.

The trees on the Fae side were twice as tall. Their thick, healthy canopies were alive with small animals. Their trunks were smooth and healthy. No ichor oozed from rotting bark. The ground itself was a dark brown, showing rich, fertile soil. Fireflies danced within the tree branches, signaling their desire to mate, and lighting up the forest as if it were on fire. But it was not a fire that would harm.

Tall grasses and flowers, so delicate that they looked to be made of light and color, bobbed lazily between the tree trunks. There were winding paths through the wood that were marked with white stone markers making it easy to navigate.

Finn stiffened when he heard the tinkling Fae laughter. The will-o-wisps that he had seen by the heads of those Fae investigating the loss of life appeared along one of the well-marked paths. There were *dozens* of wisps so that meant dozens of *Fae*.

The Fae's voices were light and full of fun. They were clearly reveling in a beautiful night. He thought that their voices were broader, warmer, more exuberant due to wine and plenty of it.

Finn caught flashes of them through the trees. Their slim figures were clad in well-cut garments of silk and velvet and leather. They had long hair in all colors from jet black to brilliant ruby red. One of them--a young woman with hair as white as spider silk--danced ahead of the others. She spun in a circle with her hands above her head. The dark-green, silk sleeve tumbled down her slender arms to reveal alabaster skin.

Tyreon made another low bark to get his attention. When he glanced at the white wolf, it took a meaningful step towards the Fae. Finn though was backing up, shaking his head.

"No, they'll see me!" Finn hissed.

Tyreon took *another* step as if to say, "That is the point."

"No, Tyreon! The Fae are--they won't recognize me as one of their own," Finn whispered.

Fae voices rose up again, speaking in their musical tongue. Though he could not understand what they were saying, he recognized a name they called out in awe: *Thalanil*.

Fae King Thalanil Ravenspar of the Eclipse Throne.

Terror raced through Finn as he glimpsed a figure, taller and broader than the rest, dressed in red and black, move through their ranks. His long black hair flowed over his shoulders like a waterfall of silk. He glided through his subjects with a predatory grace. Finn could almost *smell* his magic; it rolled off of him so thickly in waves. Finn took a step *towards* him.

Soon, I'll see his face, Finn thought, *but if I see him… I think he'll see me and he'll know I stole life from his lands.*

With that realization, Finn turned and ran in the exact opposite direction.

MORE THAN WANT

Rohan stretched out his bare legs in the tub, submerging them completely beneath the hot water. He'd already scrubbed himself down and rinsed *twice*. Each time the water had practically been black. Considering Tempest had dragged him for miles through the Lupine Woods, he shouldn't have been surprised. Dirt had gotten *everywhere* and he regretted he hadn't been at his best when he'd been with Finn. Despite Finn's flimsy rags, the young man had been intensely clean. Rohan, in contrast, could have grown trees based upon the amount of soil on his body.

Serxio had made sure that the bath was not only emptied of the filthy water, but also that the tub was scrubbed as well before it was refilled. The young northern lord came into the bathroom at that moment with a tray. There was a carafe of red wine and a plate heaped with roast beef and steaming, rosemary-studded potatoes. A meaty-scented steam rose up from the platter. Again, Rohan thought of Finn and wished he could have shared this meal with him. The sad bread and dried meat, which Finn had treated as a feast, made Rohan self-conscious of having so much. Some royalty believed they *deserved* more than their people. He believed he *served* his people and his people were starving. Serxio placed the tray on a table that was even with the lip of the tub.

"Your bed is being turned down. The fire has been set. The curtains are pulled. I believe all is prepared for a peaceful rest," Serxio stated as he bowed gracefully. "Is there anything else I can do for you, my king?"

"No, Serxio. Everything is… perfect, as always," Rohan stated, but it really *wasn't* perfect.

It wouldn't be *perfect* unless Finn was here, but that was something beyond Sexio's skills to procure for him. Rohan, himself, did not even know the young man's surname or where he lived.

Foolish not to have gotten all that information. Yet if I had asked him, he would have asked me the same, and I would not have been able to answer with anything other than an outright lie.

Serxio must have seen some of his sadness regarding Finn and interpreted it as dissatisfaction from his work.

"My king, are you sure there is not something else you wish or need or want?" Serxio asked.

"Would you sit with me for a moment?" Rohan asked.

Serxio's eyes brightened. "Of course, I would be honored!"

He often asked Serxio to sit and talk. He enjoyed hearing about the young man's exploits, the gossip at court, and all the things that he would never experience being king.

"Bring over a chair and sit down. I'm sure you've been on your feet all day," Rohan said.

"Thank you, my king."

Serxio brought a wooden chair from the corner over to the tub and settled down. He poured Rohan a glass of wine, but Rohan indicated that Serxio should have the glass while he just drank out

of the decanter. He took a large swallow. The wine was tart and he smacked his lips before taking another gulp.

"So… how is your mother?" Rohan asked.

He didn't really care what Serxio talked about, only that he spoke and distracted him. Serxio was lifting the cup to his lips as the question came out and he couldn't quite hide the grimace.

"Dear mother is… well, *herself*, which is to say…" But Serxio let the sentence hang, seemingly to have a loss for words.

"So things are still not good between you?" Rohan intuited.

"They are as they have always been. We are two very different people." Serxio shrugged but stared moodily into his wine glass.

"I was not old enough to find out how different I was from my parents when they passed," Rohan said softly.

Serxio's head jerked up and a look of alarm crossed his face. "I am so sorry, my king! I should not have complained--"

"No, no, I did not mean to compare our situations. It was only to suggest that it is easy to see one's parents in a rosy light when they died before one could assess them as an adult," Rohan explained.

An impish smile crossed Serxio's lips. "Or when one is between childhood and adulthood. That is the worst time, I think, for both parties."

"Indeed! I tested my uncle often during those years," Rohan agreed.

And with those words, a welling of regret for the suspicion and anger he had felt towards Uncle Hugues went through Rohan. His uncle had always been there for him. If he had wanted the throne himself, he could have done what many royals had in their time, which was to set up an "accident" for Rohan before he reached the age of majority. Then the throne would have been his. But Uncle Hugues had been his greatest protector and cheerleader. He had always wanted Rohan to succeed. So whatever he was hiding--there was no doubt he was hiding something, unfortunately--likely had a good explanation.

And I need to trust him to tell me. Tomorrow, he will tell me.

Rohan stabbed a piece of the savory roast beef, his appetite abruptly restored. There was a crispy layer of fat along the outside while the inside was pink and dripping with juice. He was sure that Finn would love this. The young man would probably be overwhelmed with one piece, but Rohan would slowly build him up to a man's appetite. He would delight in feeding him new and different things that filled out those hollow cheeks and had a layer of muscle covering those narrow hip bones.

Look at me! I can hardly have a thought without bringing it around to Finn! Rohan thought and mentally shook himself.

He chewed and swallowed before asking almost tentatively, "Have you ever been in love, Serxio?"

The young lord laughed. "Many times! I think I am in love every day."

"No, no, I mean *truly* in love," Rohan said, not counting the many dalliances that Serxio had. He broke hearts up and down the coast.

To his surprise, Serxio looked sad and a little stricken. "Once."

The way that Serxio treated matters of the heart so lightly, Rohan hadn't expected this answer.

"When? Who was she? Or *is* she?" Rohan asked.

"She is the reason that my mother sent me here," Serxio said with a wry smile. "Not that I regret coming here to serve you, my king. Yet… I wonder what would have been."

"Tell me about it." Rohan quaffed a large amount of wine.

The water's warmth was relaxing him, the wine even more so, and images of Finn's face were floating before his mind's eyes. He wanted to talk of love, even though he found it ridiculous. He remembered his uncle's words that love came unbidden.

I am not in love with Finn! He cautioned himself. *This is an infatuation. Something to distract me from my troubles!*

And yet, Rohan had never dreamed of simply taking care of someone like he did Finn.

"She was not of my station. She was the miller's daughter," Serxio said as his eyes grew distant.

Hearing that it was a commoner that Serxio had loved caused Rohan a momentary qualm. He wondered if anyone was truly free. Though Serxio's house was a noble one of ancient lineage and ample funds, Serxio still was required to marry someone of the right class with the proper pedigree and equal, if not more, money.

"We met in town." Serxio smiled as he clearly remembered that first meeting. "She was pretty in her way, but it was her eyes--so full of intelligence and humor--that caught me. She was able to say so much with a single *look*."

The way that Serxio was speaking of this miller's daughter was so different from the way he spoke of anyone else he'd bedded. His voice was sad, almost bitter.

"Normally, when two people are attracted to one another and have a moment alone, they make love and we did, of course. But, mostly, we *talked*. We spoke the most about books," Serxio laughed and he looked younger and more handsome than normal. "She couldn't read at first, but I was teaching her. Her favorite pastime, though, was for me to read to her and then for us to discuss what was written. What did it mean? Did the author intend this or that? Could there be a deeper context? She had a perfect memory and a clever mind. She wanted to know *everything*."

"Forgive me, but that doesn't sound like the type of woman you chase nowadays."

In Rohan's estimation, the sillier and more empty-headed the girl, the more likely Serxio was to follow after her.

"No." Serxio's lips flattened. "Because I do not want to--to *care* again."

Rohan frowned. This was a little too similar to his own feelings on love. Reflected back at him, they sounded wrong. It also sounded like real love if Serxio wanted to avoid it again.

Love brings attachment and pain when that attachment is broken. By circumstance. By… death.

"She was so much more than what her station would afford her in life. She could offer so much more to the world than it would let her." Serxio's shoulders curled forward as if expecting a blow. "I often compared myself to her. She took things seriously and wanted to improve them for everyone. While I just… existed."

Rohan thought of Finn's easy analysis of why no one had told Rohan the truth. His position. His power. No one spoke frankly to him. Finn intuited that easily. Perhaps it was true of all people in power to a certain respect, but Rohan believed that Finn understood that particularly about him.

"My mother found us--not making love--but reading together! And that was worse in her eyes, because she understood that this was not some casual affair, but instead was *real*." Serxio's lips thinned.

Rohan thought of how, for the first time, that afternoon he'd wanted to stay with someone he'd slept with. How the light form lying on top of him had felt *right*. How excited he was to hear Finn's voice and learn more about the person who stirred his loins and his imagination.

"And so she had to put a stop to it." Serxio's gaze went bleak.

It took Rohan a moment to absorb the finality of those words. Lady Tora had to put a stop to it. She had to stop it.

Serxio continued, "Simply making us both promise to stay away from one another was not going to work. Telling me that a relationship with a commoner was unseemly wasn't going to work either. Because I realized, as my mother ranted and raved at me, that I could not imagine a life without Rachel."

Rohan drank more wine then. "You could have… have married who your mother wanted and kept--kept Rachel."

"No," Serxio said with a firm shake of his head. "I could never marry anyone other than Rachel. She would always be the only one for me."

Rohan thought of Finn again. He thought of Finn working in the castle and for him to pull the young man into a room and ravish him. He thought of Finn living in one of his estates where he would ride there and visit the young man whose face caused his heart to clench. But both of these lives were ones in which Finn was *hidden*. Would Finn accept such a half-life? And if he really cared for him, would Rohan ask for such a thing?

"Yet… you are not with her now," Rohan pointed out slowly. "You came here and you have never gone back. So you acquiesced to what your mother wanted."

"I was going to return. I planned to spend a year here, make favorable connections, get some coin and… marry Rachel. Here, we could be anyone," Serxio said and there was this sad smile on his lips. "But that was not to be."

Rohan did remember there was a rumor that Serxio was going to return home at one point during his tenure here. But Serxio had never come to him to ask to be released from his service and the rumor had died away as the months had passed. He'd never asked Serxio about it until now.

"Why not?" Rohan asked, guessing the young woman had found someone else or had decided that marrying above her station would cause misery for them both. But the answer was not the one he expected.

"She *died*."

Rohan felt his heart plummet into his feet. The romance had ended not because Serxio or Rachel had given up on one another, but because death had stepped in and parted them. He thought of how Serxio never allowed himself to get too close to anyone he was romancing. He had always seen Serxio's Lothario act as amusing, but now he saw it as a facade to hide a broken heart.

"I'm so sorry, Serxio." Rohan clasped the other man's shoulder.

Serxio nodded, his eyes looking a little misty. "You know I think about what might have been almost every night. For certain there would have been issues because we married each other instead of staying within our class. But I like to think that our love would have made those seem inconsequential. I'm actually positive it would have."

Rohan wondered about that. If he was free to choose anyone to marry, who would he ask? Or who would ask him? Tearlach would never be on his list. Nor the other kings and queens that his uncle would suggest. None of them spoke to his soul. But who he married wasn't just to please himself, it was to add something to the kingdom. And Rirea required so many things right now.

"You know I can't even bear to crack open a book now," Serxio said, discreetly wiping a few tears away, but smiling, wanly, at least. "I cannot just read for myself. I want to read for Rachel. *To* Rachel. And, since she isn't here to listen, I just don't see the point of it."

Rohan let Serxio drift into silence as they both drank their wine. He ate the meat and roast potatoes with little relish now. Every bite tasted of ashes. He told himself that this infatuation with Finn would pass. He would go back to being content as he was. He wouldn't long for another's face. He wouldn't want what he could not have. He wouldn't wish for the impossible.

Yet, in that moment, he wished very hard.

DREAM OR REALITY?

Finn woke to the sounds of Magna singing softly and spoons and forks scraping over bowls. Those sounds anchored him to where he was. The kitchen. In his nook. But that felt wrong. He had been someplace else.

The woods!

He rocketed up. His heart thundered in his chest.

King Thalanil! Finn cried internally. *He was there! He was looking for the thief of life! He--No… no, that was a dream. Just a dream. Just… just a dream.*

Finn ran his hand through his hair. Cold sweat prickled his scalp. He had merely dreamed he was in the woods, surrounded by wolves, then the white wolf, Tyreon, had come to him and the Wall… the Wall had been gone.

His memories of the Fae lands were vivid. It was so beautiful under the moonlight, he could only imagine what the sun would have shown him. But the Fae lands were filled with *Fae*, and he, most desperately, had not wanted to meet any. He lowered his shaky hand to his lap and twisted his fingers in the fur of Rohan's cloak. That calmed him some. He breathed deeply. He was not in the woods. He was home. He was *safe*.

It wasn't a strange thing to dream about exactly. After seeing the Fae at the Wall yesterday, it was expected that he'd have a nightmare or two about them coming for him. Hadn't Magna always said that, despite her friendship with the Fae, they were jealous of what was theirs? And if one stole from a Fae, one should expect to pay ten times that cost?

But King Thalanil himself wouldn't be after me! Finn cautioned himself. *That's… that's absurd.*

Of course, he had never seen King Thalanil, not even a portrait, yet in the dream, he had imagined the Fae king having a predatory beauty. A cold, classic countenance. Finn had imagined him like a blade sheathed in silk.

My imagination is running away with me! Finn laughed at himself.

He rubbed his face with both hands to eliminate the last dregs of sleepiness. He needed to help Magna and Emmott with the cleaning of the dinner dishes then he could crawl back into his nook and sleep some more. Yet he was amazed at how refreshed he felt and the light around the edges of the curtain did not look like candlelight and firelight, but…

Oh no!

Finn pulled back the curtain to his bed to look into the sunlight-flooded kitchen. Magna was leaning over the porridge pot while Emmott's head--covered by wispy, white hair--was hovering over his own bowl of porridge.

"It's morning!" Finn practically wailed.

Magna looked up and smiled broadly at him. “So it is! And not a more beautiful morning could there be!”

“But I was supposed to help you with the dinner dishes!” Finn cried. “I was just going to lay down for a minute… how did I not hear you both?”

Emmott lifted his head from his simple breakfast. He gave Finn a yellow, gap-toothed grin. “You slept like the dead. Me and Magna could have been dancing a jig and you wouldn’t have woken!”

“Finn, it was your day off,” Magna clucked. “Now, come and get your breakfast. Master Christopher is already up and told us that he is to have your help the whole day.”

“The whole day? But I *told* him I have other chores!” Finn practically yelled.

The anger that had risen the other day snapped through him again. Both Magna and Emmott looked up, startled.

“Well, it’s good to see some fire in you, Finn,” Emmott chuckled.

“I… I just had strange dreams,” Finn answered with a wince. “I’m sorry I shouted at you. I was just… frustrated.”

Finn put a hand to his temple. There was a high whine in his ears as if a cicada was singing its song inside of him. There was pain too. A headache? He had used a lot of power yesterday and not just to cause Tanglewood to bloom.

“All of us get up on the wrong side of bed nowadays,” Magna told him. “Though I do understand your anger at Christopher’s presumption of your time.”

Finn looked at both of them helplessly. How was he to help Christopher “all day”, somehow see Rohan at the cabin at noon, and do all his other chores? It was impossible!

“I won’t let you two have the burden of my chores,” Finn assured them. “I’ll do them after my work for Christopher is done, even if I have to stay up half the night.”

“Absolutely not, love!” Magna shook her head. “You’ve been run off your feet for weeks now. We can handle things here. Can’t we, Emmott?”

Emmott was gumming his porridge, but he mumbled, “Absolutely.”

“It’s best not to… to upset Christopher. You know how he gets,” Magna said as she set a bowl of porridge for him on the table. It was steaming hot and eating it when it was warm was the only way to get the thick material down without anything to sweeten it.

“We all know how he gets. Jonathan most of all knew,” Emmott muttered.

Finn froze and studied their faces. Miles, evidently, wasn't the only one who thought Christopher was behind Jonathan’s death.

“Do you really think Christopher had something to do with that? That he--he killed Jonathan?” Finn asked.

“I think that Jonathan was asked down to Christopher’s laboratory and he died that night,” Magna said with a pinch of her lips. “You’re supposed to meet him there, Finn. Now, I don’t think he’ll be trying to poison you, but you must be on your guard.”

Finn nodded.

“Now come and eat your breakfast!” Magna lilted.

Finn did not do his usual thing of throwing open the curtains and sliding his legs out of the nook before hoping down. He had to keep the cloak a secret even from Magna and Emmott. Magna would disapprove of him being with a lord. She would automatically--and maybe *rightly*--assume that Finn was just a plaything for a lord to toss aside.

Rohan isn’t like that! Finn thought. *At least, not with me! Or am I being unforgivably naive?*

He feared the latter. But even if he pointed out to Magna that he was using the lord as much as the

lord was using him in some ways--for pleasure, company, an escape--she would never believe that his heart wouldn't get entangled with this man.

I will protect myself against unrealistic expectations, Finn told himself. *I will take what is offered. I will not hope.*

But every word felt like a *lie*.

Shaking himself, he drew his knees up to his chest and rocked back so that he was not weighing down the cloak. Then he carefully rolled it up and set it in the darkest corner of the nook. He tossed his blanket over it. He would have to think of another hiding spot, but this would have to do for now. Besides, no one would go poking through his things. Not Magna or Emmott anyways, and he'd be with Christopher "all day". Finished hiding the cloak, he pulled back the curtain further and swung his legs out of the nook and down onto the floor.

"Ack! Finn, were you out this morning playing in the mud?" Magna asked.

She was staring down at his feet with a bit of horror. He understood why. Her clean floor was about to be set upon by a pair of muddy feet. His feet though had *not* been muddy when he'd laid down.

That was a dream last night, wasn't it? Finn thought with a cold chill running through him. *Wasn't it*?

FIRST THINGS FIRST

When Rohan woke up that morning in his four-poster bed, he was determined to do two things. The first was to take into his confidence Leonid and Serxio about Finn. He was intent on seeing the young man that day and he wanted to make sure his absence wouldn't cause alarm. Leonid would, of course, never speak of what he did. Serxio did enjoy idle gossip, but Rohan was certain he would keep his secret as well. After what Serxio had told him of Rachel the night before, he was certain the young lord had depths to him. Besides, Serxio had more ideas of how to romance people than he did.

The second thing was to speak to his Uncle Hugues and learn whatever secret the older man was hiding from him. Before yesterday he would have sworn that, at least in matters of the kingdom, his uncle was an open book. There was no daylight between them on issues, either. But last night his behavior had been so radically different that Rohan was still shaken by it. Not as much as he had been, but still it had to be explained.

But first things first.

While he was eating breakfast on his bedroom's balcony, he had Leonid and Serxio called to his rooms. Both arrived promptly. Both stared at one another with suspicion. They were not friends. Leonid found Serxio lazy and useless while Serxio found Leonid too stiff and formal for his taste.

"Leonid has no sense of humor!" Serxio had complained to him once after one of their clashes.

"You hid his armor," Rohan replied dryly. "You made him late."

"Only because he interrupted me with this new housemaid. I swear, he appears like a jack-in-the-box at the worst possible moments!" Serxio had growled. "Now the cook has taken the girl under her wing and I am not allowed into the kitchens!"

"The cook knows you will break her heart, which will cause the young woman's work to suffer, which cook feels will look bad upon herself," Rohan had pointed out. "She's doing what she must to protect herself above all."

Serxio had crossed his arms over his chest. "Still! It was worth hiding Leonid's armor!"

Now the two men--loyal soldier and loyal lord--eyed one another like two wild dogs over a bone. Who would move first? Who would snap? Who would leap? Considering he was the bone, he wanted them both to calm down.

"Serxio! Leonid! Thank you both for coming so promptly," Rohan said.

"Your majesty!" they said in unison, which had them both scowling at each other in mid bow.

Rohan shifted one leg over the other in an effort to hide his amusement. He wore only a black silk dressing gown and the material slid coolly over his skin even under the warm, spring sun. The sky was a peerless blue and even the Lupine Wood looked a little brighter under it. But Rohan could see a

darkness forming along the Wall. He frowned as a trace of unease went through him. Could the Fae already be amassing their forces to come into Rirea? If so, Rirea would have no chance against them. He drew in a breath though. He was going to do all he could to save his kingdom today, but he was not going to give up Finn in the process.

"Please, won't you sit?" he asked them both.

They froze for a moment. Though they had each sat with him, it had never been so casual at the breakfast table. There were two chairs already prepared for them as well as generous servings of creamy scrambled eggs, crispy bacon and well-buttered toast with luscious strawberry preserves. After that initial hesitation, the two of them both quickly sat as they took in the plates of food.

"Please, eat."

"Thank you, your majesty!" Serxio eagerly draped his napkin on his lap and took up his silverware. "I swear that the cook is *still* upset with me because of…" He glanced over at Leonid with a narrowed look, "well, because of a misunderstanding. My food has not been top-notch like this is."

"There was *no* misunderstanding, Serxio," Leonid remarked dryly. "Unless you count seducing someone as a *misunderstanding*."

Serxio's eyes narrowed further. "I *see*. Are you supporting her vendetta against me?"

Leonid looked quite innocent. "I think you are simply reaping what you've been sowing, Serxio, but we shouldn't be discussing this in front of the king."

"Normally, nothing is better than your banter. However, I wished you to join me today to discuss something of a *personal* and important nature," Rohan told them carefully.

He never used the "we" that most royals did. He spoke of himself like himself and not in third person. He found it utterly pretentious. And it was totally unfitting in this instance because he truly was not acting on behalf of the kingdom. This was for himself.

The two paused with forks halfway up to their mouths at the mention of "personal" issues. They again gave each other narrow-eyed looks. They would clearly not be outdone by one another.

"Your majesty, anything *I* can do to help you would be my greatest pleasure," Serxio said, placing a hand against the center of his chest.

Grinding his teeth, Leonid said stoutly, "My life is yours, my king."

Rohan laughed lightly. "This isn't a matter of life and death, Leonid. It's…" He paused. How to explain Finn? How to explain the *wonder* of the young man without sounding like a fatuous fool? "I did not tell you everything that happened to me yesterday."

Both men came to alert.

"Did something…" Leonid paused, frowning, clearly unsure how to ask if he was harmed in some way, "happen?"

Rohan nodded. "I was saved by a young man."

"I knew it!" Serxio pounded the table with one hand and then colored when he realized what he'd done. "I am sorry, my king. It was just last night when you asked me of *love*…" A darkness washed over Serxio's face of old grief--memories of Rachel, undoubtedly--before it cleared like a spring storm. "You *like* him!"

"Lord Lemos!" Leonid cried in a repressive tone. "You do not speak to the king like that!"

"I'm right though, aren't I?" A smile twitched at Serxio's lips.

"I… do," Rohan admitted and nodded once more. "Very much."

"That's wonderful!" Serxio crowed. "I mean… is it wonderful?"

"It is, but also complicated," Rohan said. "He's not… nobility. But he has a noble spirit. He's not

like anyone I've ever met."

Both young men went silent and had stony faces. It wasn't that either of them cared he was romancing someone not his station. They cared because they knew it had to be kept secret.

"He rescued you so he must be brave and clever," Serxio said.

"He is at that. Very intelligent. Cultured actually. His family was once well to do, but after his mother's death, he has been… reduced in circumstances," Rohan said, trying to think of the kindest way to put Finn's servitude into.

"You wish to help him," Leonid intuited.

"Yes, very much so, but I do not know if he would take my help, which is where the two of you come in," Rohan admitted. "First, I do not want to have the Guard assuming I am in danger when I'm with him for one thing. The second is… I believe you both may have ideas on how I can assist him without seeming to."

That morning he had come to the conclusion that regardless of what changed between them, he needed to get Finn into a better situation. He just wasn't sure what would suit the young man, what Finn would take, and if there was some way he could help without Finn knowing so there was no debt between them. If Finn was with him, it would just be because Finn wanted to be and not because he felt he owed Rohan anything.

"You don't want him to know you're behind whatever help is given, do you?" Serxio intuited.

Another nod from Rohan.

Leonid tilted his head and remarked, "If he is brave and quick-thinking then perhaps the Guard--"

"No, Leonid. I do not know if my heart could take Finn going into danger, especially on my behalf," Rohan admitted. "Besides, I do not think it would suit him."

"Why not have him work at the castle or one of your estates?" Serxio suggested as he crunched bacon.

Leonid made a tsk sound. "You said yourself that he does not want the young man to know he had any hand in getting him a position! Serving here--"

"He does not know I'm king," Rohan interrupted.

Both of their heads swung towards his, mouths open, twin looks of stupefaction on them.

"I suppose he might not recognize you if he's not nobility and your likeness on the coin of the realm looks nothing like you," Serxio remarked. "And you… you didn't tell him?"

Rohan shook his head. "I said I was a… a *lord* of a failing estate. He seemed completely at ease with that explanation. If I told him I was king…"

"Things would change," Leonid guessed.

"You probably think this is all very foolish." Rohan grimaced.

"I think it's admirable, actually. You've never wanted us to serve you because of your position, but because of *who* you are. Your character. You've never asked anything of anyone you wouldn't do yourself first," Leonid defended him.

Serxio smiled. "You're royal, yes. But you're not formal. I don't want to say you're one of *us*. But you've always seemed more comfortable in your ratty leather armor than your kingly robes."

"That is true, Serxio," Rohan said with a smile. "I don't want this young man to be beholden to me and I do not want him to be with me because I am king. Do you understand?"

"Yes, perfectly, but how can we help you in this?" Serxio asked.

"I will be seeing him today in the Lupine Woods--"

"You are not going in the woods alone, my king!" Leonid was practically quivering as he said this.

"He cannot very well seduce a young man with you present," Serxio hissed and gave Leonid a cat-eyed narrow stare. "Let me guess, you've never been with anyone before?"

Leonid blushed so hotly that the color ran beneath the collar of his armor. Rohan wondered if Serxio's guess was right.

"The king cannot be alone in those woods!" Leonid retorted hotly.

Serxio's forehead creased. "My king, forgive me, but…"

"What is it?" Rohan asked.

"The woods are not exactly… *romantic*," Serxio pointed out.

"Indeed not! With the wolves! The poison! The outlaws!" Leonid listed off just some of the woods *delights*.

"Yes, I know, but there is a cabin where we met yesterday that is… well, it is *not* suitable, but it is secret and safe from prying eyes," Rohan admitted. "And it's where I've agreed to meet him today."

"But we could send word to him to meet you someplace else!" Serxio suggested. "I know of a dozen places, tucked out of the way, but quite cozy where you might meet up in secret!"

Rohan internally groaned as he admitted, "Yes, that would have been best, except… I do not know his last name nor the name of the estate nor the family he works for. Asking for that information would have led to questions in kind to me and… I didn't want to make up elaborate lies. At least not more than I already have."

"So meeting in a cabin in the Lupine Woods is the only solution this time?" Leonid asked.

"Yes, and I intend to be there for that meeting at noon no matter what," Rohan said, tilting his chin up.

"We'll have to make the best of it then!" Serxio said brightly and he rubbed his hands together. "If we get there a little early, I can make even the most run-down cabin look fantastic! Well, *fantastic* might be a tad of an exaggeration if it is a complete hovel, since I don't have that much time to prepare. But no matter! I shall succeed!"

"And I shall be there to guard your person," Leonid stated stoutly.

"But you cannot--"

"We shall hide in the woods surrounding this cabin," Leonid interrupted Serxio.

"We? You and I? In the woods?" Serxio pointed between himself and Leonid.

"What did you think? You cannot be in the cabin with them, because, as you said," and here Leonid blushed hotly again, "that would be inappropriate. So you will be with me in the woods, keeping watch."

"Oh… it's just I thought… well, after I arranged everything that I would go back to the castle," Serxio admitted.

"No, you will be with me--"

"In the woods, watching for danger, yes, I see that now," Serxio said with a sigh. "Well, at least I'll get to see this young man today. And I will find a suitable place--not in the woods--for your next encounter, my king."

"Thank you, Serxio. Thank you, Leonid," Rohan smiled broadly. "I knew I could count on you."

Now, Rohan thought with less pleasure but just as much determination, *to find out what my uncle is hiding from me.*

INTO THE WOODS

Finn opened the door to Christopher's basement laboratory. As soon as he did so, the pungent, bitter scent of potions burned his nostrils and he wrinkled his nose and turned his head. He could already hear the bubbling of liquids and the drip of fluids coming from down the stone steps. The desire to step back, close the door, and take off outside into the sunshine was almost overwhelming, but he had promised--*lied*--that he would partner with Christopher to find a potion to restore life to the land.

At least for now, Finn told himself. *My cooperation will buy his silence about the times I sneak off with Rohan.*

Finn started down the damp, moldy steps into the dank basement that Christopher had taken on as his own. Torches flared against the walls, leaving black soot staining the wall behind them. The bitter aroma of potions grew ever stronger with each step that Finn took. When he reached the bottom he saw Christopher's back. His brother was seated on a stool and hunched over a scarred, wooden table. He was muttering to himself and had, seemingly, not heard Finn's approach. Finn stopped on the bottom step and listened to his stepbrother.

"Why is this not working? The reagents are right! It showed promise with the mouse liver, but now nothing!" Christopher banged one fist against the table and the glass bottles clinked together like nervous children. "There is something in the soil! Something indefinable that's causing the changes in the vegetation and--"

Christopher whipped around when Finn's foot scuffed against the stone floor. His eyes looked rather wild and his normally neat hair was mussed.

"Were you up all night working?" Finn asked as Christopher was still in the same clothes as the evening before.

Seeing some of the stains on the sleeves and waistcoat caused Finn to repress a sigh. He would have his work cut out for him trying to get that clean.

"You're here! Finally!" Christopher raked a hand through his hair. It was slightly greasy, likely from hunching over a vat of something. Christopher shifted slightly and Finn caught sight of two squirrels. They were sliced open and their skin was pinned back to boards as Christopher was poking around in their innards. Finn's mouth thinned. Seeing where he was looking, Christopher, at first went to hide it, but then he proudly moved to the side. "Sacrifices must be made."

"Yes, well, I don't see how killing animals helps solve the problem with the land," Finn said.

"Because we need to isolate *what* is wrong with it in order to counteract its effects. With these necropsies, I am comparing the internal organs of animals who live in the woods versus those that live mostly outside of them. There are differences."

Finn came further into the laboratory. Besides the scarred table that Christopher sat at, there were other tables along each wall. On them were glass tubes that could be placed over fire to heat their contents, others where mixing could be done, and others where more animal necropsies had taken place. There were shelves upon shelves of malodorous ingredients that were painstakingly labeled, not just with what was inside, but when the herbs were picked. Some of the ingredients had been pounded into powder, while others were simply dried in their natural state, and others were kept fresher in a pickling solution. Christopher watched Finn silently as he walked slowly around the room and examined everything.

"You're quite serious about this," Finn said quietly.

"Were you like Father and thought I was just wasting my days down here?" The bitterness and hurt in Christopher's tone were quite evident. Normally, his eldest stepbrother hid what he felt unless it was disdain, but not this time.

"No, but I have to admit this is much more impressive than I thought. It shows logic and order to what you are doing," Finn said.

Christopher's mouth, which was poised to form a sneer, loosened into a half-smile and he shrugged. "This is my work. I really do intend to cure the land."

"I believe it." Finn stopped by his workstation and looked down at the eviscerated squirrels. Even with his layman's eye, he could see that there were distinct differences between the animals. He pointed to the one whose organs looked blackened and shriveled. "This is the one from the forest, yes?"

Christopher nodded. "If I didn't know better, I would think the thing was dead. But it was quite alive when I caught it."

The other squirrel's organs were a relatively healthier tan and red color in comparison, but there were suggestions of a blackening on the organs' edges.

"Are you seeing these types of disparities in the other animals?" Finn asked.

"Yes. As you can see though, whatever is occurring to Rirea is strongest in the forest than the rest of the land, but I believe it's spreading out," Christopher told him. "The lack of life is just the beginning. We'll soon see the poisonous changes taking place in the forest on our estates and in the farmland."

"So you think that soon we'll be having animals outside of the forest as sick as those within it?" Finn confirmed.

"I do believe that is what will happen unless it is stopped," Christopher said as he wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of one sleeve.

"Would it kill you to wear less expensive clothes down here?" Finn asked as he saw yet another stain on the fine fabric.

Christopher shrugged. "I forget what I'm doing sometimes."

That was actually a better excuse than Miles',which normally involved getting food or wine stains all over himself. Surprisingly, Christopher was trying to help people.

But at a price. I doubt he'd give some of his magical potions to anyone for free, Finn thought.

"So what do you want me to do?" Finn asked.

"I need more samples," Christopher said. "I haven't yet isolated what is causing this infertility in the soil and mutation of the animals."

"I don't want to catch animals for you to kill, Christopher," Finn said firmly.

"Even if by doing so you were helping a human being live?" Christopher asked.

Finn's mouth opened and shut. He knew what Christopher was saying. Would he trap squirrels so

that a human being could be helped? Most likely, yes.

"Don't worry about the animal part now." Christopher waved a hand through the air. "In truth, your part with the animals will come from your ability to cure them with your magic."

"Even if I could… and I'm not saying I can as I've never tried," Finn clarified, "I don't see how that can be put in a bottle."

"You leave that to me, Finn." Christopher looked at him keenly. "Have you never *practiced* with your magic? Seen what it can truly do? Or have you restricted yourself to the once a year life-giving for the land?"

The truth was that Finn was a little scared of his magic. He also was afraid that if he tried anything, he would be caught. But the way Christopher asked this--not exactly with a sneer--but with honest curiosity had him almost wanting to answer.

"You haven't!" Christopher guessed and shook his head. "Finn, if I had your gifts there wouldn't be *anything* I wouldn't know about them already."

"You have time to yourself to learn anything you want, Christopher, while I am scrubbing your shirts free of chemical stains," Finn found himself saying and was startled by his own courage in this.

Christopher chuckled. "So you *do* resent doing all this menial work?"

Finn considered this. "Serving someone can be noble. Taking care of Tanglewood is an honor. But you, Miles and Gerard don't appreciate any of it. You think nothing of how much work you place upon those helping you. You work people until they break."

Christopher said nothing at first. His eyes though were shadowed. "More reason to help me and get out from under. I bet we'll make enough coin that you can purchase Tanglewood back from Father."

Finn bristled, but then held himself still. He shouldn't have to purchase Tanglewood *back*. It was already *his*. But he knew that his stepfather would never feel that way in any case. He'd charge Finn a premium for the estate. Though really, Finn doubted Gerard would ever let him go. For a moment though, he imagined being Lord of Tanglewood. He thought of how he could make the estate thrive and its people do the same.

Then Rohan and I would be equals, too…

"I can see that your imagination has been set aflame at that idea!" Christopher smiled slyly.

"Not for the reasons you think," Finn said.

"Oh?"

"Not for the power or the respect or anything like that. But so I could help people," Finn told him.

Christopher snorted. "Ah, the *people*!"

"It's true! I care for those on the estate! I--"

"I know you do," Christopher said with a weary shake of his head. "You care too much. People let you down. Things do not."

"Things don't love you back, Christopher," Finn pointed out, feeling sorry for his stepbrother for a moment.

"But they don't betray you either." Christopher stared darkly at the dead squirrels and Finn wondered who had betrayed him. As far as he knew, his eldest stepbrother was a loner.

"So… back to what you need of me. If not animals…" Finn prompted.

"More samples. Of trees, grass, soil, plants, etcetera. All at certain distances from the wall if you can find them."

Christopher reached over to a leather-bound notebook. He turned several pages, which were all thickly covered in his script, until he reached some pages with measurements and materials. The

measurements were in paces so it wouldn't be exact but close enough. He carefully pulled those pages out and handed them to Finn.

"This looks easy enough," Finn said, again impressed with Christopher's thoroughness.

"Also, I want you to put each sample into one of these vials." Christopher got up from the stool he'd been sitting on and led Finn over to a pack.

It was actually a rectangular piece of heavy-duty canvas with dozens of vials that were stuck through leather loops keeping them in place. The canvas could be folded into three pieces and buckles would hold it together.

Finn blinked. "That's handy. You really have thought of everything."

"Yes, of course, I did." Christopher handed the bag to Finn.

It had a strap that Finn slung across his body. The pack was comfortable and would be easy to carry as he collected the things Christopher wanted. And, with a feeling of giddiness, he realized that since he was *expected* to be away in the woods, he could easily go to the cabin and spend time with Rohan and not just today, but *every* day. Doing this work for Christopher would ensure that he would be out of sight and out of mind for weeks doing this. He and Rohan could continue to meet up whenever the lord was free. He couldn't have planned it better than this!

Finn wet his lips as he tried to hide the enthusiasm in his voice, "I believe I know what to do. I'll start now and--"

"I will be coming with you," Christopher stated as he adjusted his tunic.

"You don't need to do that!" Just as quickly as his hopes had risen, Finn felt them dashing to the rocks.

"I do actually," Christopher said archly. "I need to show you exactly how you should harvest the specimens. I want to make certain that you're doing it correctly."

"I've done this for you before, Christopher," Finn said with rising alarm. "You've never had any complaints!"

"This will have to be far more precise than what you've done in the past," Christopher explained.

But Finn was still panicked. How could he get to the cabin to see Rohan with Christopher attached to him like a barnacle?

"Why don't we go to a location nearer the property? You can show me and then I can go further--"

"Because the deformities are more distinct closer to the Wall and that's where I want you to begin." There was an angry buzz in Christopher's voice that appeared when he thought someone was being exceptionally stupid.

"You're not dressed to go into the woods," Finn said, likely making him sound even more foolish.

"I don't care about these clothes!" Christopher growled. "And you don't have to worry about them either. I'll burn them when we're done. Do you have any more reasons for us not to go into the woods together?"

Oh, Finn had many, but he wasn't foolish enough to bring them up. So he shook his head. Perhaps he could somehow leave a note in the cabin explaining why he wasn't able to meet today. His heart was in his feet.

This is just one day, Finn counseled himself. *Once I convince Christopher that I can collect specimens to his specifications I'll have those days alone in the woods. But what if my not showing today will cause Rohan to lose interest?*

But if that was the case, that Rohan's admiration was so thin, then perhaps it was best he knew right away. As much as it hurt his heart to think about it, getting more involved with someone who didn't truly value him was not a plan. It was better to know now. A quick stab of pain and then done

before Rohan grew roots in his heart.

"Let's go," Christopher said and brushed past him to the stairs.

The two of them, though, had not gone but a few steps before they heard Miles' suspicious yet plaintive voice coming from above them, "What are you two doing?"

Christopher hesitated only half a second before he continued to press ahead. Miles was forced to retreat.

"None of your concern, Miles," Christopher snapped.

"Well, it *is* some of my concern. Finn was supposed to lay out my clothes and help me dress this morning, but that idiot Emmott came instead!" Miles cried, voice full of recrimination. His mouth was pinched. His eyes were pained.

"Can you not dress yourself? Or have you really become that infantile?" Christopher sighed.

"I can, but I shouldn't have to!" Miles actually stamped his foot.

"It appears that Emmott did a good job," Finn stated as he took in Miles' fussy purple paisley silk tunic, gold silk belt, black hose and matching shoes.

"It doesn't matter! *You* are the one that is supposed to serve me, Finn!" Miles stamped again.

"Finn is helping *me*." Christopher's eyes narrowed dangerously as Miles stepped in front of his path.

Finn stepped to the side, away from his stepbrothers, and strove not to sigh even as he felt time slipping away before his noon meeting with Rohan. Or rather, when he *missed* that meeting with Rohan, but did leave a note. He needed to leave a note.

"Doing what? You are utterly avoiding every marriageable prospect in the kingdom!" Miles pouted.

"More for you, dear brother. Now we must--"

"This is something for your potions, isn't it?" Miles' eyes narrowed now.

"It's none of your concern!" Christopher snapped.

"Oh, then I'm sure you won't mind me going to Father and seeing what he has to say about it, will you?" Miles looked malevolently gleeful.

If murder could take a physical form, it would have been Christopher at that moment.

Through gritted teeth, Christopher growled, "What do you want?"

"To be part of whatever you're doing," Miles said with a shrug. "I'm bored."

"Well, we wouldn't want you to be *bored*, now would we?" Christopher muttered then, with a rather ugly light in his eyes, said, "We're going into the Lupine Woods."

Miles paused in buffing his nails against his tunic. "T-the Lupine Woods? Ah…"

"Yes, we're going right up to the Wall," Finn said helpfully. If he would have any chance of getting that note to Rohan, he couldn't have both stepbrothers coming with him. "We'll be within touching distance of it."

Miles' mouth opened and shut rather like a fish out of water. "Oh, well…"

"Still want to be a part of this?" Christopher's voice was lit with laughter.

Miles realized that if he said *no*, that he would not be part of the "fun" and would seem a coward, but if he said *yes*, then he would actually be stuck going into the woods. The Lupine Woods was Miles' least favorite place. But Christopher's obvious desire for him not to come had Miles going for the "yes" answer.

"I'll come! I want to come! You'll let me come!" Miles cried.

Finn pinched the top of his nose. How was he going to ditch these two and leave that note?

Rohan will understand if I am not there. He'll knows my time is not my own, won't he? Or will

he think like a lord and not like a servant?

"Fine." Storm clouds were in Christopher's eyes. "But don't come crying to me when you get your tunic dirty! And you better not slow us down!"

With that, the three of them headed out of the manor. The moment they stepped outside, Finn noticed dark clouds hovering along the Wall. He squinted. Was there lightning on the other side of the Wall? For a moment, a section of the Wall--almost exactly where he'd drawn the life--seemed to *flicker* in and out of existence. Finn bit back a gasp.

Did I just… did that just happen? Finn wondered.

He looked at his stepbrothers to see if anyone else had noticed this flickering, but Christopher was making a beeline to the stables, while Miles was just as intent on beating his brother to them. Finn reluctantly followed after them. If not for Rohan, he would not have been going into the woods that day. Something was very *wrong*.

HER

Rohan adjusted his black, silk vest with the silver stitching as he strode towards his uncle's rooms. The vest matched the black tailored pants and thigh-high black suede boots. Serxio had insisted that he also wear the bloused white shirt with onyx cufflinks. His blond hair was tamed. His stubble was shaved and he even wore a touch of a spicy scent. He was not dressed up for his uncle, but his meeting with Finn afterwards.

"We must arrive at the meeting place early, my king, so that Leonid and I can set up the cabin to be as romantic as possible," Serxio had explained as Rohan had dressed.

"I can help as well. Just direct me as you will," Rohan had said. "I want to do something for Finn myself."

There was a momentary hesitation as Serxio and Leonid had exchanged glances at his request. Sometimes they likely felt he was too informal for his station, which amused him no end. He was king. He could be as formal or informal as he liked. The rules did not apply to him. But he understood that they held his office in high respect, as well as himself. But this was different. He was courting Finn. He would not have his servants do such intimate work for him.

"Of course, my king, we can think of something for you to do," Serxio said carefully, which caused Rohan to swallow a sigh.

"I do hope that you do not think of me as so pampered as to be helpless. Leonid can attest that I often cook when we are on overnight engagements," Rohan stated with perhaps a little too much pride.

"You shouldn't be… we should arrange… ah, Leonid, explain!" Serxio gestured towards the Guard captain.

Leonid looked like he would rather march into battle alone with no armor and no weapon than speak about this. Rohan felt a little bit of pique. He might be the highest born, but he wasn't useless! Did they think him truly incapable?

"My king, you… you should not be doing this kind of menial labor. Cooking and *cleaning*…" Leonid lifted his shoulders helplessly.

"There is nothing menial about either. I appreciate a clean room and a well-done meal as much as anyone." But recognizing that they weren't exactly saying that, he added, "I know you both take your duty to serve me very seriously, but I *wish* to do things for Finn. Not have you do them. Not all of them anyways. I want this to have a personal touch."

Both men had bobbed their heads in agreement, but he still had a feeling that he would be fighting to spread out even a blanket. But their hearts were in the right place. They just needed to understand his desire to take care of Finn himself and not take credit for others' work. But he had eagerly taken

Serxio's advice as to what to wear and how to style his hair. He felt fresh-faced and ready for anything.

He knocked rapidly on his uncle's door, his other hand already on the door handle, prepared to try it even if his uncle did not respond right away. He would not be denied this audience. But the door was opening before the last knock. His uncle was standing there, looking hollow-eyed, unshaven and in clothes that looked and smelled like he'd been stewing them in sulfur. Rohan almost took a step back.

"Ah, Rohan, I was expecting you. Please come in," his uncle said and shuffled to the side so that Rohan could slip past him, which he did with great alacrity.

Whatever words Rohan had meant to say upon seeing his uncle, died on his lips. The other man looked blasted. Rohan silently followed his uncle as the older man padded down the hallway to the main sitting room. His uncle collapsed on one of the chairs by the fireplace after gesturing for Rohan to take the other. Rohan waited as his uncle stared into the fire as if he had forgotten all about him being there. His uncle suddenly shook himself and focused on Rohan once more.

"You must have questions, but first… I am so glad that you are *well*, my boy." Uncle Hugues reached over and touched Rohan's left forearm with a tender smile on his lips. That smile quelled some of the hurt that still nestled in Rohan's chest over what seemed like a terrible betrayal to leave him to the woods. "I knew you would be. Because Tyreon was not after you and the wolves followed after him and all followed after *me*. But still… I am ashamed by what must have seemed like a complete abandonment."

Rohan wasn't sure it *wasn't* a complete abandonment. His uncle's words caused that wound to flare to life again. But he put it to the side, because the other things his uncle was saying were far more interesting.

"Tyreon? The white wolf?" Rohan guessed that they were one and the same.

His uncle nodded. "Yes, he is the king of wolves and he serves the Fae King Thalanil."

A chill ran through Rohan. "But he was on our side of the Wall!"

"Yes, he was. Perhaps still is." His uncle huddled lower in his chair and drew his arms around himself.

So I was not mistaken that the creature--Tyreon--was Fae and magical, Rohan thought. *He must be far more than even a giant wolf if Uncle fears him so.*

"Why is Tyreon here?" Rohan asked and he began to list his own hypothesis before his uncle could answer, "Because King Thalanil intends to lower the Wall and invade? Is this Tyreon his scout? Does he know about your discovery of the tree with leaves of glass?"

"I do not know. It could be any of that or none of that," his uncle stated. "But it is not good that Tyreon is here. It means the Fae king himself has an interest on *this* side of the Wall. He would not send his precious white wolf here for anything less than a weighty reason."

"But why when presented with a choice would Tyreon be after *you* instead of *me*? I am the king," Rohan asked.

If the Fae king truly intended harm to Rirea, going after his uncle would be a *personal* blow to Rohan, but it would not affect the running of the kingdom. So it made no sense that Tyreon would ignore him and attack his uncle unless...

"Yes, but Thalanil and I have… a *history*," his uncle said and grew silent again.

Rohan's forehead furrowed. "What history? Uncle, now is not the time to be reticent."

In all their talks over the years about the Fae and the Fae king, his uncle had always spoken of them with a scholar's distance. He had never claimed to have any personal connection to them. Yet,

now that Rohan thought of it, that seemed strange. During his parents' reign, Fae and humanity had mixed in great numbers, flowing back and forth over a border that was mostly in name only.

And my parents were close with Thalanil, Rohan remembered. *Why would my uncle not be?*

Rohan had assumed that it was because his uncle was retiring in the extreme, but again, that sounded like a hollow reason now. So Rohan prepared himself for answers he might not like.

"I never thought to speak of this again," his uncle said. His fingers curled around the arms of his chair. "I never thought to speak of *her* again."

"Her?" Rohan asked, the single word seeming to have such power.

Was this about his uncle's lost love? What could she have to do with King Thalanil?

"We both loved her. Thalanil and I. Maeve Ashton." His uncle stroked down his throat as if remembering hers. "She was like no one else. Beautiful, of course, but that was the *least* of her attractions. The Ashtons were old blood. Ancient blood, so a mixture of human and Fae. Yet she did not have enough Fae blood for Thalanil to consider marrying her and making her his queen."

His uncle's expression hardened and his hands tightened on the arms of the chair so much that there was a creak from the wood in protest. "I told her to forget him. She should be with me. Become Lady De Clare and not the mistress of the Fae king. But she loved Thalanil as if… as if under a spell. Even after he killed your parents and put up the Wall… she *still* loved him. She would not believe ill of him. She would not even consider that he could kill your parents in cold blood despite all evidence to the contrary."

Old anger and hurt were baked into those words. But Rohan was simply shocked by the fact that his uncle was in a lover's triangle with the Fae king and had *never* mentioned it before. This showed an intimacy with the Fae that was far from some scholar's perch.

"Has he sent Tyreon here to seek out this woman?" Rohan asked a little helplessly.

It had been a long time since the Wall had gone up. At least it had been in *human* terms, but for an immortal Fae, it would be but a blink of an eye. So perhaps Thalanil hoped simply to see his lost love.

"Anything is possible," his uncle said, but his tone indicated that he did not believe this to be true. "But it would be a vain errand."

"Why?"

"She… died."

That last word seemed to have physical weight and thumped to the ground between them, like some festering wound.

"I'm… I'm sorry," Rohan said as his uncle's face blanched as he remembered her loss.

Hugues gave him a ragged smile. "Yes. She had even remarried at that point, unwilling to… to be with me even when Thalanil was out of reach. But her loss haunts me still."

"So Tyreon went after you, because Thalanil still resents your love of Maeve?" Rohan clarified.

There was the slightest of hesitations, but then Hugues nodded. "We were rivals. Perhaps in his mind, we still *are* even though he won in so many ways."

Rohan thought of Finn then and how he had put the young man into a box that left Finn out of any running to be officially his lover, let alone his husband. Thalanil had done this to Maeve. So could he judge the Fae king so badly?

"Do you think Thalanil regrets his behavior towards Maeve?" Rohan found himself asking.

"She would have made a great queen. And because of her human blood, she would have bound humanity and the Fae together," Hugues said with a sigh. "If Thalanil had intended to treat her properly, I would have backed down for that outcome alone. But he did not. He wanted the joy of her,

but he would not give her the respect she deserved."

Rohan winced as he saw some of the same behavior echoed in himself.

But I am going to help Finn. It is different!

Yet that thought seemed damning in and of itself.

"If Tyreon was looking for Maeve, and found her dead, he will report this to Thalanil," Rohan stated slowly.

"You fear that Thalanil will attack us because of it? No, he understands that mortals are fragile. He would say that it is but one of the things that makes us *lesser*," Hugues answered dryly. "No, it will just cause him pain, which he justly and richly deserves." His uncle then shook himself. "But I do not think he came here for Maeve. Tyreon was likely scouting, potentially, for an invasion."

A chill ran down Rohan's spine. This introduction of a lost love had given him some hope that perhaps an imminent attack was not coming. But Hugues evidently thought this was a vain hope.

"It has had me thinking about our marriage conversation." Rohan must have stirred at those words, because his uncle put up a hand. "It was actually something that *you* said about how Rirea is a bulwark against Thalanil. If we fall then there is nothing standing between the Fae king and the other human kingdoms."

"True, but would Thalanil have such expansionist plans beyond Rirea?" Rohan shook his head.

"You must understand that all of this land was once Fae. Rirea was the heart of it, but the other kingdoms were all under the banner of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne. No Fae--and certainly not Thalanil--ever truly lets go of what it considers theirs and they will do most anything to get it back. It is both a weakness and a strength," his uncle explained, rubbing his whiskery chin.

Rohan narrowed his eyes. "You're thinking about an *alliance*, not of marriage, but against a common enemy? Basically, if they do not help defend Rirea *now* then they will have Thalanil on their doorstep *later*?"

His uncle nodded, but then with a slightly playful smile, he added, "I am not saying that you *shouldn't* marry, Rohan. I believe you should sweeten the deal with your hand in marriage, to be honest. But with many royals in attendance, none will think they have the upper hand."

"Or that we are begging for aid," Rohan agreed with a grunt. "We will have a better bargaining position."

The thought of marriage caused a pit to open up in his stomach as usual, but it might truly *not* be necessary. Perhaps he could make the other monarchs see that it was simply in their best interests to assist Rirea without him being part of the bargain.

"But we still need to get past the Wall, unless we wait for Thalanil to bring it down," Rohan pointed out. "Last night, you said you were doing an experiment?"

His uncle nodded, looking incredibly weary, and he wondered if the older man had slept at all. Seeing Tyreon again had obviously shaken him. Remembering Maeve may have disturbed him even more so.

"I was attempting an ancient scrying technique to find the tree. I may have narrowed the location down more, but it will have to be investigated," his uncle said, passing a slightly shaking hand over his forehead.

Concern filled Rohan. "Uncle, you need to rest. Give me the location you wish investigated. I will see that it is done."

"Thank you. Yes, I think you're right. I must sleep." His uncle nodded slowly and looked up at him with a faint smile. "There is something different about you today, Rohan."

Rohan colored. Had his uncle noticed his outfit and that his hair was combed? He thought

perhaps he had not been paying enough attention to his personal hygiene lately, but, then again, going out into the woods hunting every day had not exactly required him to wear finery.

"Do I? Well, just a good night's sleep," Rohan answered.

"Sleep, is it? I would have sworn it might be something else." Again, a smile hung about his uncle's lips. "Well, let me get you those locations. Then, I will retire."

And I, thought Rohan, *will go see Finn.*

UNEXPECTED MEETING

There had not been one moment of their journey into the woods when Miles had not complained. His voice was like a constant whine in the background that rose above the churr of insects and the flicker of bird wings. Some of these birds must have been abnormally large though as they snapped branches in the canopy up above, and, also incredibly fast, as the moment any of them looked up to see what had caused the noise, the birds were gone.

"Could you shut up, Miles," Christopher hissed. "You are making enough noise for every creature in the Lupine Woods to hone in on our location!"

Miles, who had been complaining about the heat, though it was relatively cool under the canopy, scowled at his older brother's back. "I don't know why we had to come here! Your potions never work! It's a waste of time to do whatever we are doing!"

"No one asked you to come, little brother," Christopher reminded him. "You butted in. Now you're paying for it."

Miles scowled even more. The one thing he hated more than being in the Lupine Woods, evidently, was being in them because he chose to be. He reached down and patted Sunbolt's neck, but the horse made an angry whinny and shook his head. Sable, the horse that Christopher rode, appeared indifferent to her rider, but not to her surroundings. She danced nervously under him, causing Christopher to spend more time trying to control her than even fighting with Miles. Sweetfire was calm, trusting Finn to lead them safely in and out of the Lupine Woods as he had done many times. Though she did feel his anxiety and flickered her ears more often than usual.

"How far are we from the Wall, Finn?" Miles asked almost plaintively.

"Not far, Miles," Finn answered for the hundredth time.

"I see no sign of it though," Christopher said with a frown.

"You won't. It will seemingly just appear. I don't know why, but that's how it is," Finn reminded him.

His eldest stepbrother peered ahead of them between the massive tree trunks as they carefully walked their horses along the trail that Finn had located. It appeared to be the same trail as the one he'd taken before when he met Rohan.

There was a level of foolishness in taking this exact trail because it would take them near where he stole the life and the Fae had been investigating and also where the Wall had appeared to *flicker*. But he told himself that the last part had been his imagination. Besides, this was the best way to get to the cabin.

His newest plan was that he would lead them to the cabin then he'd go inside and scratch a note with his knife on the wall boards. He'd make up some pretense to do so. Miles would not want to go

into such an "old and disgusting place" so there was no fear he would go after Finn. Christopher would be too impatient to get off his horse as Sable would take forever allowing him back on her again. So neither brother would likely come inside the cabin. However, he was getting more and more nervous because noon was fast approaching. He didn't want to chance meeting Rohan there with his stepbrothers in tow!

"I think we're nowhere *near* the Wall!" Miles whined. "Finn, you've gotten us lost and Father will hear--"

Just then the Wall reared up before them like a blade thrusting through the earth. The path had slightly changed or the woods had changed, for they were much closer to it than he had been yesterday when he'd come upon it. Finn's mouth went dry. He quickly looked through the Wall for those bright will-o-wisps floating by Fae heads but the glassy material seemed more opaque than transparent today. He hoped that the same would be true for those on the Fae side so they couldn't see him either.

"It really does just appear!" Christopher's voice echoed with interest and surprise.

Miles' mouth, which was still open due to his complaint, took on an almost comical aspect of despair. "Is it just me, or is it getting darker?"

It *was* getting darker. All three of them craned their heads up towards the sky, the clouds that Finn had seen from Tanglewood were boiling over here. It truly looked like it would storm now whereas before the bad weather had seemed more transient. Maybe they would have to go to the cabin in any event to escape the rain. Though the company this time would not be as congenial.

Perhaps it was because they were all looking up that they didn't hear the sounds of hoofbeats and the whinnies of horses--especially Tempest who eagerly greeted Sweetfire with a particularly loud nicker--until the last moment. Finn's head shot straight towards where the sounds were coming from. It was like some nightmare version of the day before as Rohan appeared from between two trees. With him though were two other men.

Shock ruled the day as the six of them stared at one another. It was *not* usual to meet anyone else in the woods. Most people in their right minds would not come into the woods. But still, to come upon a party such as this would have been unheard of, but for the fact that he and Rohan had been scheduled to meet.

But it is not yet time! Finn thought stupidly. *I should have had more time!*

Rohan's mouth was open in greeting, but he quickly shut it as his eyes flickered between Christopher and Miles then back to Finn. Finn tried to put an explanation in his gaze, because he couldn't actually speak and show his stepbrothers that he knew Rohan. Too many questions would be asked and Rohan might not want anyone to know they were acquainted. Yet Rohan had brought two people with him so… it was all so confusing! Finn wasn't sure if any of his meaning got across to Rohan other than he looked miserable. Rohan looked perplexed.

"I say… there are people here," the man on Rohan's left said.

It was clear he meant to say something else, but had changed it to that. Was he in on the secret meeting between Finn and Rohan? Yes, he must be. This man was most certainly a lord for though he was likely dressed *down* he still wore a purple cloak and a dark-green tunic that no commoner could afford or would have the boldness to wear. His dark curly hair fell over his forehead and there was a green hat with a purple feather perched at a dangerous angle on the side of his head. Finn guessed that it must be pinned almost to the death to keep it on like that. He looked like some exotic flower misplanted in Rirea's soil.

"What are you doing here?" Christopher asked, his tone cold and imperious as if he owned the Lupine Woods.

Rohan lifted an eyebrow at Christopher's rudeness, but said nothing.

Rohan was looking more handsome than ever. His hair was not full of leaves or twigs and his face wasn't spattered with mud and blood. His golden hair practically shone. His handsome features were well-scrubbed. His clothes were elegant yet not fussy. He wore all black from the leather duster he had on to the black vest veined with silver, the tight-fitting black pants and suede boots. What Finn wouldn't have given to be with him alone to tell him so!

But he brought people with him!

Yet that was when Finn saw that both of Rohan's companions' saddlebags were full to bursting. He knew almost instantly why.

He wanted to dress up the cabin before I got there. And it looks like he brought a feast for us!

Finn's eyes began to tear at the thoughtfulness of this even as his heart thudded dully. This feast was not to be. He had a feeling things were going to be worse than him simply missing out on a divine meal with an incredible man.

"We are here for a picnic," the man who had spoken before said with a wave of one hand in which he held a lace handkerchief that likely cost a gold piece alone.

"A picnic?" Miles blinked. His outfit looked garish even in comparison to the other speaker. "In the Lupine Woods? Are you mad?"

The man's eyes flickered to them and away. "Well, I had a *fancy*, you know, and brought my men with me to--to do it."

His men? Ah, Rohan must have told them to hide his position in all of this so that my stepbrothers will have no clue who he is. Clever! Finn thought.

Christopher's eyes were narrowed. "But you're not in charge."

Finn let out a gasp that he barely was able to bite down on. Rohan's eyes widened slightly. The man who had been speaking fluttered his handkerchief all around him as if to dispel such a charge.

He got out, "What? I dare say you have no manners--"

"He's in charge." Christopher pointed at Rohan. He was looking at Rohan as if he recognized him vaguely. Maybe they had met at some garden party or something. "I don't know whatever is going on here, but you need to leave. We have important business."

"Do these woods belong to you, young man?" Rohan asked, and there was something in his tone that even Christopher couldn't have denied the force of.

His eldest stepbrother's mouth opened and shut. "Of course not. The king does. But we are here to help the kingdom. You are here to *allegedly* have a picnic, despite how mad that appears."

"Something to help the kingdom?" Rohan's eyebrows rose, but the fact that Christopher had identified him as the leader must have told him that Christopher was not an idiot so maybe there was some merit to his words.

Miles, on the other hand, was an idiot and he said, with a roll of his eyes, "Oh, please! He's just gathering stinky herbs so he can make potions to poison the local animals! I mean, if they're meant to do more, they never do. But what's that there in your pack? It looks like wine and sausages and--"

"Miles!" Christopher snapped.

"What? I'm hungry! They have food. Why don't we have a picnic with them?" Miles asked with a pout. "You can get your herbs and grubs later!"

"I wish to know the names of people I am going to break bread with," Rohan stated, looking at Christopher.

Finn would never know if Christopher would have answered Rohan, because there was a flash of lightning. It was so bright that Finn was blinded for a moment. He was blinking his eyes to clear his

vision when he saw it.

Or rather *didn't* see it.

The section of Wall they were by had *disappeared*, and just like in his dream, he could see the Fae lands beyond. They were as spectacular as he had dreamt they were. Trees so tall, he couldn't see their tops. Trunks and branches an almost gold color. Leaves a thick and healthy green. Vibrant-colored flowers and delicate grasses. Soil looking rich and fertile. The overwhelming smell of life.

But there was a nearer draw than all of this beauty.

Right by where the Wall had been was a set of three boulders, stacked one on top of the other, and on the very top of them sat a great, white wolf.

Tyreon...

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

This meeting with Finn was supposed to take him out of his kingly duties. It was to be a time of pure pleasure and indulgence in a life that afforded little of both. Rohan had wanted to make a fantasy real in the little cabin in the woods without thought of Fae or royal games.

He'd made sure that both Leonid and Serxio were both dressed discreetly for this mission. Well, in the case of Serxio he'd had to settle for not having any indication that he served the king. Bright green and purple weren't exactly subtle. Leonid though, too, had seemed to mourn taking off the Guard captain's armor that he had worked so hard to acquire just as much as it had pained Serxio to dress down. But both of them had understood that he was simply a "lord" in Finn's eyes, and that they were his friends. So they had to play roles other than themselves.

But all of that had come to an abrupt halt and exploded when they had come upon Finn and the other two young men. The young man's joy and surprise at seeing Rohan had quickly morphed into misery and alarm. This had not been either of their plans to meet up this way. But Finn was a servant--likely to these two who were with him based upon the quality of their clothes as opposed to the young man's--and Finn's time, as he had said, was *not* his own.

Rohan had guessed though that Finn had been planning on getting him word or slipping away to see him in the cabin somehow. The young man was clever. So clever. But so was the blond one who had recognized Rohan as the leader as opposed to Serxio. And Serxio's lame, but well-meaning, attempt to disguise the real reason for their party being there, had all but backfired too.

Yet that was nothing to what they faced now.

"The Fae lands," Rohan found himself murmuring. "How can they be so beautiful?"

The Wall was down and the Fae lands were spread out before him, beautiful and lush and alive, making him realize anew just how poisoned and dead Rirea now was. The vibrant colors of the flowers and the trees and the bark and the ground itself had Rohan blinking as they seemed so bright. His eyes were not used to such *intensity* as everything in Rirea--even Serxio's outfit--paled in comparison. The only one who seemed to shine as brightly was Finn, even though he was dressed in rags.

And then there was Tyreon.

"Is that--is that a wolf? It's too big to be a wolf," Serxio murmured, one hand lifting to his mouth as if to catch his own words before they left his lips.

Rohan thought he heard Finn whisper, "Tyreon."

But he must have been mistaken. What would Finn know about the name of Fae King Thalanil's wolf?

The white wolf itself stared at them from a tower of boulders, like a wolf god, ready for sacrifices. Tyreon looked bigger and more majestic than he had before. His red-eyed gaze had slowly moved over all six of them with a dispassion that showed this wolf knew they were no match for him. Tyreon's gaze lingered on Rohan for a moment longer than the rest, recognizing him perhaps from the other day, or maybe seeing some of his parents' features in his own face.

But when Tyreon caught sight of Finn, the white wolf had *frozen*.

Rohan drew in a sharp breath himself. Was the white wolf going to attack Finn? Finn was the smallest, he was also separated from the group by several feet, and he was also the nearest to Tyreon. And with no armor to cover him--barely enough cloth over that supple body to be considered decent--he would be easy prey.

"It's going to attack," Leonid hissed, echoing his own thoughts.

Tyreon took a step forward on one of those massive paws. His eyes glowed like jewels in the dark. He was fixated on Finn. There was no doubt about it now. Finn, though, did not seem afraid, more like anxious. His eyes snapped between Rohan, Leonid and Serxio and the white wolf as if he was leery about what they would do, not Tyreon.

"We've got to get out of here!" the one who had suggested eating with them cried and wheeled his horse around inexpertly. It bolted back into the forest, taking its rider for a ride rather than the other way around.

"Miles!" Finn shouted with wide eyes.

"He's a coward, but he's right this time, Finn," the clever blond said and he too was turning his horse and digging his heels into its sides. "Let's get out of here!"

"Wait, Christopher, it's not going to--" Finn got out, but the rest of his words were drowned out by the whinnying of Christopher's horse and the thunder of hooves as he ran away too.

There was a low growl from Tyreon. Everyone remaining snapped their attention back to him. The white wolf's eyes flickered between Finn and his group.

Separating the weak from the herd! Rohan thought. *NO! I won't let you harm him, Tyreon!*

Things then moved both fast and slow at the same time.

Tyreon prepared to leap down from the rocks. Finn's eyes widened. Rohan grabbed his crossbow and aimed at the beast. Tyreon lunged. The bolt flew. And somehow, Finn came between bolt and wolf, screaming, "NO! DON'T HURT HIM!"

And then it was as if the bolt bloomed out of Finn's side. Finn reached down almost absently where the metal "flower" jutted out from his side and touched it as if he couldn't quite believe it was there. Dark crimson stained Finn's ragged tunic. He started to sway in his saddle.

"FINN!" Rohan screamed.

Finn toppled from the saddle towards the missing Wall and the fierce white wolf. He landed heavily with a groan and Rohan saw his eyelids flutter shut. Unconscious. Tyreon leaped to Finn's side. His jaws closed over Finn's right shoulder, but surprisingly it only grasped the threadbare material of his tunic.

Leonid had his bow out, ready to send an arrow at the wolf, but he could hit Finn just like Rohan had.

Rohan shouted out, "NO! DON'T SHOOT! WE MUST GET CLOSER!"

Tyreon managed to drag Finn into the Fae lands before the worn tunic simply gave way. There was a ripping sound and a handful of fabric was in Tyreon's mouth. The wolf was seemingly looking for another thing to latch onto its prey and drag it further into the Fae woods. It was strange that the white wolf simply didn't sink its teeth into Finn's flesh and drag him easily that way. But perhaps

Tyreon liked his prey alive while he feasted. Whatever the cause, Tyreon paused and moved far enough from Finn to give Leonid a chance with his bow. Arrows feathered the ground where the white wolf had been but Tyreon moved like lightning, backing up, away from Finn, with low growls in its throat.

"Keep it up!" Rohan cried and urged Tempest towards the young man.

There was a tingling sensation as he passed through the empty section of Wall and a jolt of electricity ran through him the moment that Tempest set foot on the lands of the Empire of the Eclipse Throne. Leonid was advancing as was Serxio and both of them sent arrows and bolts towards Tyreon, who jumped left and right and left again to avoid them, but seemed unwilling to simply run away altogether.

"Finn!" Rohan cried as he leaped down from Tempest's saddle to crouch by the unconscious young man's side. "Finn, by the gods, what have I done? Why did you step in between? Why?"

But Finn was deeply unconscious and could not answer him. Unconscious but not dead. Not yet. The young man was still breathing. Rohan quickly drew up the shirt, ripping it so that he could see Finn's wounded side. From the position of the arrow, it did not appear to have punctured any vital organs. But he was bleeding and that bolt had to be removed.

"My king," Leonid said, forgetting himself, as he brought his horse by Rohan's side, "is the boy--"

"He's going to be fine," Rohan stated.

He told himself that this statement was not just one of hope. He'd seen plenty of wounds in his day and this one shouldn't be fatal. So long as Finn rested and did not get an infection.

I'll make sure he recovers. I'm going to bring him to the castle. He'll get the best care.

"The wolf finally left!" Serxio called. He, too, had come over to the Fae lands. He looked down at Finn with concern. "That wound… it's not too bad, is it? He's just unconscious, isn't he?"

"It will be all right, Serxio. We just need to get him back to the castle to the healers," Rohan said as his hands expertly moved over the young man's body. "I do not want to move him, but we have no choice but to--"

"Ah, sire?" Serxio's voice had crept up an octave.

Thinking that Tyreon had returned, Rohan immediately went for his sword, drawing it out of its scabbard so fast there was a ringing sound. But the woods before them were empty of the white wolf. That was when he realized that Serxio was not looking into the Fae lands, but *back* towards Rirea. Rohan spun around. What he saw caused his breath to catch in his throat and a tremor of fear to go through him.

The Wall had returned.

And they were on the wrong side of it.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN CINDERS & ASHES (A GAY RETELLING OF CINDERELLA) BOOK 2!

* * *

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS & MORE HIGH FANTASY FROM X. ARATARE!

First, thank you so much for reading Cinders & Ashes (Book 1)! I am so appreciative of you taking time to read my work and I hope you enjoyed it, because there's a lot more to come. I've gotten a bunch of questions about this series, so I thought I would answer some of them here.

How many books will be in the Cinders & Ashes series?

Right now, I think there will be five books, but don't hold me to that! While I do not think it will be less than that, it could be, or, more likely as I write long, it could be more.

About how long will each book be?

I am aiming to have them between 50-60k in length, but I write to the arc, I don't write to the length. But based upon my plan, that's what I think they will be.

Will there be audiobooks?

Yes! That is the plan. I will do my best to keep the audio and ebooks launching together as much as I can.

How often will the books come out?

Every 3 months approximately. I'll have a pre-order for the next book ready by the day the previous book goes live on Amazon.

Are you the same as Raythe Reign, www.RaytheReign.com?

Yes! Aratare is "wraith" in Romanian (I'm not Romanian, I just thought it was cool) so Raythe = Wraith phonetically. But what you're likely wondering is if there's more to read by me and there is a TON on the site.

Which brings me to, if you'd like to know more about my serial site, who not check out the first 10 chapters of another high fantasy story, The Elven King's Blade, for FREE?

Just go HERE and read to your heart's content. If you'd like to sign up, there are instructions! I'd love to see you on the site.

If you have any other questions, please feel free to reach out to me on Facebook or through email raythereign@gmail.com

THANK you again for your support!

X. ARATARE/RAYTHE